



thirteen reasons why, will byers PART I by hardcore.wolfhard

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Summary: „ HEY, IT'S ME. SLOANE, SLOANE THOMAS. I KNOW, MENTAL, RIGHT? " Will Byers is tired. He's tired of trying, of struggling. He's gone through so much shit and all he wants is a break. He took a chance on a new friendship and where did that leave him? Stranded on an island of guilt, a sea of hecklers in every direction. He just wanted a break. au, canon divergence; 13 Reasons Why

1. the day before

"Will!"

Shaking his head, the small boy quickens his steps. He hopes he's fast enough to avoid confronting the familiar voice, his head already swimming with negativity.

"Will, wait!"

Hopping up the stairs leading to Hawkins High, Will pulled open the double doors. Stepping in, he heard the clumsy footsteps of his old crush following him in. He was only a couple feet away from his locker when he found his path being blocked off. He's frozen in place as a familiar freckled boy stands in his path. As hard as he tries, he can't glare at them. Can't yell, can't protest. There was too much history. The older boy's bright brown eyes are narrowed in sadness.

"Will, *please*." He pants, tired from the distance he just ran. Will bit his cheek to keep from showing the guilt that panged around in his gut. Slowing his pace, he walks slow enough for him to follow as he approaches his locker.

Right to 20, Left past zero and to five, right to 34.

"I think we should talk."

Will scoffs, his locker door drifting open. He doesn't remember when he got so aloof. His gaze drifted to the locker to his left, the door covered in fake notes and old photographs. It made him sick that people only chose to care after someone ends up dead. His attention falls on a pair of heart-wrenchingly beautiful brown eyes and his frown deepens. The ghost grins at him, dimples just as evident as ever. Will blinks and they're gone. Shaking away the memories, he pulls out his history textbook, sliding it into his backpack. Shutting the locker, he throws the dial.

Turning, the taller boy's eyes capture his. He'd almost forgotten he was there. Will finds himself frowning, old wounds tearing open. Shaking his head, he fought to hide the lump that threatened to

release how he was really feeling.

"What is there to talk about, Mike?" Shaking his head, Mike grew visibly anxious.

"I-I don't know, Will." Will's frown deepened. "I don't know."

Averting his gaze, Will let his eyes take in the suddenly interesting floor tiles. He taps the front of his sneaker on the tiles creating a new scuff for the janitor to complain about. The bell rings to hurry kids to their classes. In another three minutes, the late bell would ring and Will did not need another late on his record. Lifting his head, he took a deep breath. He can still feel Mike's eyes burning through his face, burrowing permanent indents into his psyche.

Every time he managed to get away, everything came rushing back with so much force.

"What happened to us, Will..?"

Shaking his head, Will drew in a shaky breath. Turning to look at Mike, he let his eyes trace every feature on his face. Connect the dots of his freckles into constellations and ingrain the already unforgettable face into his brain. The goodbye was always the hardest part. Tearing his gaze away, he blinks away the tears that gathered in his eyes.

His voice is hard as he mutters. "I don't know either, Mike." A soft snuffle from Mike and Will knows it's time to go.

"Late-Bye, Mike."

He starts the walk towards his first period, leaving Mike behind at his locker.

Will slides his keys into the lock of his front door, pushing open the slab of wood. He lets it drift closed behind him, reaching back and locking the door. Soft conversation echoes from the small kitchen as Will removes his shoes. The new puppy, Chet, was sleeping under the coffee table just a couple feet away. The voices sound distinctly like Hopper and his mother, but he was never sure if Jane would be in

there or not. He takes a soft breath to calm himself, stepping into the kitchen doorway. As he had predicted, there in the room stood most of his 'family'.

Hopper and Jane were more strained family. Hopper and his mother were dating, but that didn't make him his dad and it didn't make Jane his sister. Not to him. Jane's gaze falls on him, pity hiding somewhere behind her emotionless expression.

"Hey, mom," Will calls, gracing his mother with a smile as soon as she turns to him. She seems to glow in his presence, rushing in and pulling him into a hug. He appreciates the affectionate touch a lot more than he realized. When she pulls away, he feels empty, ready to retreat to his room.

"Oh, Will! The school called again today, Hopper and I thought we'd, you know," Will and Jane share a gaze as Hopper takes a long sip from his coffee. It seemed like all the time was time for coffee.

"Kill two birds with one stone. I know it gets tiresome, but-"

Will smiles, shaking his head. He always tries to put on a brave face for his mother. She worried too much and when she worried it got the whole family stressed. There was no point in fighting it.

"It's alright, mom. Let's... Talk." He tries, taking a seat beside Jane. Jane's gaze stays trained on Will's face as Hopper takes a seat across from Will. Joyce stayed standing, her hand placed carefully on Hopper's shoulder as he initiated the family meeting. It was long and dreary and the same as before. All the same questions with all the same answers.

I didn't know him that well.

Yes, I'm sure.

I won't, I promise.

Family is more important than anything, I know.

I... Love you guys, too.

When Jane and Will are finally released, they retreat to his room. This was a normal occurrence for the two of them. It was like a ritual and Will was thankful to have that constant while the rest of his life spiraled out of control. Jane took her place on his bed as he took a seat at his desk, staring out of the nearest window. While they were having the family meeting, his Walkie Talkie continued to buzz with the chatter of his old friends.

Trying to *reconnect*, he guessed.

It was sickening and it only made his mind cloudier, but he knew eventually he was either going to have to turn it off or answer them. After all, they were asking for him specifically. Each of them. His bag again crackled, Dustin's voice now coming through. He asks if anyone's been able to get in contact with Will. Lucas grumbles out a begrudged no and Mike's voice is hoarse as he again asks for them to leave Will alone.

Max's voice comes next, ominous and vague, "No one can just be *left alone* anymore, Mike." Jane reaches into the bag, pulling out the device. She meets Will's eyes briefly, before nodding. She holds the button, her gaze strong on the carpeted flooring.

"What?" Silence. Soft crackling and Mike decides to answer. "Hi, El."

"Hello, Mike."

"Jane, have you seen Will?" Lucas asks. Jane was always more hesitant around Lucas than the other boys. Grunting, she glances at Will. "No."

"You're his *sister*. You practically live with him."

Dustin sighs. "Oh, Lucas, lay off. What the hell do you want to talk to Will for anyways?"

"Listen, collarbone-less, I don't have time for your shit-"

Max shushes them both, a clear frown in her voice. "We never get anything done because you two are always arguing!" Mike's voice chimes, sounding more defeated than before.

"He didn't do anything. Why should we drag him into this...?"

"Because. It's his turn now." Another vague answer from Max. "Well, let's just skip him! Send it to the next person!"

"And risk our futures? By having whoever has the extras send them to the *cops*? Fuck that, Mike. You're mental." Lucas grumbles before shutting off his side. Mike scoffs. "What I did wasn't as bad as you noids. Get bent." And with that, his Walkie Talkie cuts out as well. Max seems to have already left, leaving only Dustin and Jane on the line. The silence stretches between the two, Will listening silently from his desk. Halfway through the conversation, he grew too anxious to simply sit there and say nothing.

Their arguing led him to the point of stress sketching, his stomach all looped up in constant knots.

Now his hand won't stop.

"Later, Jane. Say bye to Will for me, will ya?" Nodding softly, Jane sighed.

"Yes. Goodbye, Dustin."

Click.

Jane puts the Walkie Talkie back into Will's bag, a breath of relief leaving her mouth. Will doesn't turn to see what she's doing, his entire attention focused on the rough sketch of the view outside his window. He can hear her rummaging around, mumbling softly to herself before a package is dropped onto the desk beside his head. Looking up at her, he's not daft to the obvious discomfort and sadness in her eyes.

"Someone... Dropped this off for you. I'm sorry."

His bedroom door shuts and Will stares at the ugly brown box sitting on his desk. Scrawled messily along the top, between two clumsily placed slabs of tape is his name.

William Byers.

But no return address.

2. intro

From here on out, my updates will be every fortnight. Thanks for reading!

Will spent a good while just staring at the box. The mood that Jane had left in, leaving an even tighter knot of sickness on Will's gut. He finished his sketch, placed it into his binder and got to work doing everything but acknowledging the box's existence. He cleaned up a bit, even going as far as to sweep the floors of his room. There was nothing to sweep up, but at least he did it. From there, he got to work sorting through his photo album. The pictures were to be assorted and organized by family or... Friends.

Keeping the memories didn't necessarily mean he missed them. Right?

So he placed them in their own section, at the front of the book. Family took up the second half. The album got shoved into a drawer to gather dust until the next time he'd organize it. His gaze fell again on the box, staring back at him. Taking up space on his desk.

Waiting.

There was no point in stalling any longer. It probably wasn't as bad as he thought it was. It's just a box. With no return address. What if there was a dead animal in it? What if he had a stalker? Other than the obvious one.

Snatching the box, he settled into the chair at his desk. He tried to carefully remove the tape, despite the brown paper wrapping the box being a very ugly, non-salvageable shade. He doesn't know what he'd need it for. He was just very meticulous. Once the wrapping was finally off, he threw it to the side, looking over the old shoe box. It was a familiar brand, but he couldn't quite place where he remembered it from. They weren't shoes he'd ever wear, even if he could afford them. Vans was printed along the center.

"Vans..?"

. . .

"William Willy Billy Byers; what's the 411?" Will shook his head with a laugh, looking up from his painting. "Wouldn't you like to know." The boy that sat next to him wore a grin, as bright as a billion suns, his brown eyes creased with the intensity of his smile. The curls that he kept short hung down like noodles around his head and hiding the tips of his ears.

Shifting to pull in his chair, he never pulled his attention away from Will. Shrugging, he nodded. "I would." Shaking his head, Will turned back to his piece with a soft roll of his eyes.

"I told you to stop calling me Willy Billy." The boy tried to hide his smile, replacing it with a thoughtful frown. "What should I call you?"

"Will Byers is quite fine, thanks." He nods with a soft smile.

"Okay, William-"

"*Will.*"

. . .

Will jumped slightly at the sound at his name being called. He shifted, turning his head to the door. A small grin takes up his face as he meets the gaze of his older brother. He'd been gone for college as far as Will knew, and they hadn't really spoken since his last visit. Which was more than a couple months before. There was something off about Jonathan, though.

His gaze lingered just a couple seconds too long on the box on Will's desk, eyes narrowed and face blank before he moved. With a small smile on his face, he approaches Will, the past feelings of discomfort melting off of him. "Hey, buddy. You busy?" Will turns to look over the box before pushing it away. Standing from his desk, he shakes his head.

"No. What are you doing back?" The taller Byers boy shrugs with a hum. "Vacation. What was that?" He questions, gesturing to the Vans shoe box. Shaking his head, Will heaves a sigh.

"I dunno. El gave it to me."

Jonathan nods softly, his gaze dancing along the walls of Will's room. It was a bit cleaner than he remembered. The walls decorated with various photographs and a couple different posters that Jonathan had given to him. His dresser was a little barren without the usual knickknacks and it makes Jonathan wonder just how long he'd been gone. Leading his younger brother out and into the hall, he grinned. "Got time in your busy lifestyle for me?" Will sputtered playfully, a playful grin taking up his face.

They descend the stairs slowly, Jonathan's hands stuffed into his jacket pockets. "I should be asking you that." Jonathan furrows his brows, shaking his head.

"Busy? *Me?*" Will shrugs. "Well, y'know, with College and everything, you haven't been around much." Nodding softly, Jonathan sighed.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Will. I'll be around more often, now, though." Will manages a small smile as they reach the final step. "Vacation." Jonathan nods.

"Vacation. I'm the only person who knows how you're *really* feeling right now." Will swallows, dropping his gaze. He scratches the area under his bangs, uneasily. Jonathan pulls on a smile, leading Will out of the house; Chet yipping from his perch under the table. The door shuts behind them and Jonathan gestures to his car.

"Wanna go for a drive?" Will nods with a sigh of relief. "Totally."

The rest of the day was a blur for Will. He and Jonathan drove around until the wee hours of the night, talking about everything they had missed in each other's lives. Jonathan and Nancy were still a thing, apparently, despite the distance. Turns out Nancy actually transferred to a college in New York to be closer to Jonathan, which Will found really 'fairy tail'-esque. Will told Jonathan about the happenings at the school. Everyone acting weird and the dread that Will always got having to go to that stupid place. Jonathan promised Will drives to and from school if he ever wanted them and the younger Byers son was beyond thankful.

Riding home in silence with Mike was out of the question.

When they got home, dinner was cold and Hopper was long gone. Jane decided to sleep over, taking the floor of Will's room and Joyce was already fast asleep. It was rare that Jane ever stayed the night and whenever she did, Jonathan's room was always free; but with him staying home for a couple weeks, she'd have to make do with what she had. A couple of pillows and a sleeping bag.

Will counted his blessings and skipped dinner, sneaking past Jane and huddling into his sheets. The box on his desk caught his attention for a brief moment, the package creating a black silhouette in the darkness of the room. He probably should have opened it when he had the chance, just get it and the anxiety it gave him out of the way. Now he had to sleep with the looming knowledge of a half opened package that could very well have a dead cat in it.

Despite that knowledge, Will slept the best he had in weeks.

He didn't wake up any more awake than he usually did, but he certainly did appreciate sleeping without waking up in a cold sweat to the sound of a familiar voice ringing through his ears. His morning was just as slow and the toothpaste, just as bland. He got dressed in a hand-me-down button up tee, the pair of jeans, being the only pair he had left that was actually his. Making up for his mistake the last day, he decided to open his package.

Completely.

The box was already falling apart at the corners, so he pulled off the cover, carefully. Inside was a lot of bubble wrap. He made a mental note to give it to Dustin, only to remember he and Dustin hadn't spoken in months. What would he want with bubble wrap from *Will*? Pushing aside the wrap, he found an assortment of cassette tapes. There were 7 tapes but only 13 filled sides. Believing that they were music, Will stuffed the first two into his jacket pockets.

Sure, he was still hesitant because of the ominous brown packaging and the missing return address, but if it was just some tapes, what's the worst that could happen? After breakfast, Jane gave him a sweet smile and left with Hopper and Joyce. Will hitched a ride with

Jonathan. It was a fairly quiet drive until Will brought up Jonathan's Walkman.

Shaking the small device, Will glanced at his brother. "Can I borrow your Walkman?" Jonathan sends a glance to the headphones as they clattered along the clutch. Smiling at his younger brother, Jonathan shrugged.

"Sure. You... Find some tapes to listen to?" Nodding, Will clicked the button to open the Walkman. "Yeah, I think so. I'll let you know after school." Will placed the tape that was already in it to the side. They stop outside of the High school building and Will can feel himself groaning inwardly. Waiting at the bike rack with what used to be his party was none other than Mark Miller.

An asshole, a prick, and definitely a fake. He used to be a jock, running around with James and the other idiots across the court, tackling each other and making fools of themselves. Any way to get a scholarship, right? Will was doing that as well, using his art to his advantage, but that was beside the point. He used to be a Jock, but one day he just stopped going to practices. He avoided the other players and ditched games. Eventually, he was kicked from the team. He still kept the stupid Letterman jacket, but he was not big in the sports crowd anymore.

He was no better than Will. And him dating Jane didn't mean he had to like the guy.

His normally very neat cropped brown hair that reminded Will a hell of a lot of a bear cub, was gelled down messily. In fact, his whole demeanor seemed messy as he gestured wildly, yelling at Lucas and Dustin. Mike seemed out of it, staring off past Mark. The equally annoyed expressions on Lucas's and Dustin's faces should have shown Mark how unwilling they were to talk, but Will would have to get closer to really know what was happening.

Will gave his brother a curt nod before climbing out of the vehicle. He pulled the headphones over his head, stuffing the Walkman into his pocket, to give off the illusion that he couldn't hear. Walking slowly by, he could hear most of the argument. Even when the argument turned to the topic of poor Will Byers, Mark turning his

attention to the Mushroom.

"Hey! Byers!" Will's shoulder is snatched, spinning him around to face Mark. Will's face falls, his hands fumbling to pull off the headphones. "Listen, you *shit*-" Mike seemed to awaken from a coma, his attention snapping to Mark gripping Will's collar. Taking a confident step forward, he frowned, shoving Mark away.

"Step off!" Mark's fiery gaze turned to Mike, his hand reaching out and shoving the lankier male. "Fuck you, Wheeler. Go find a trashcan to rummage from," He jeered, referring to the suddenly obvious bags under Mike's eyes. A crowd seemed to grow slowly around them. With investigation, you'd see Jane and Max hiding in the crowd, but everyone's attention was stuck on the three males at the center. Taking a step forward, Mike left very little space between himself and Mark.

"What does El *see* in you?" He questioned softly, loathing dripping from every word. Mark's face grew red.

"*Mike*," Will whispered harshly.

"Back *off*, Wheeler." Mike refused to move, his fists opening and closing with every breath. Will ripped his gaze away to look at Lucas and Dustin only to find Lucas smiling strangely. Dustin was clearly freaked out by the fast acceleration of the bickering, staring between the two angry males.

"I mean it, Wheeler, you'll-"

"I'll what?" Mike snapped, his eyebrows furrowed and eyes wide with crazed rage. "I'll *regret* it?" Mike scoffed, a grin spreading across his lips.

"I don't regret anything more than-" Mark's face swapped to frightened anger as he grabbed Mike's sweater. "*Watch it...*" He hissed. A forced breath leaves Mike's nose as he spits on Mark.

Will flinched, staring incredulously at Mike. "Mike, what the *heck*-"

"*You watch it. Karma's a bitch*-" His sass is cut off by being thrown to the ground, Mark hastily wiping the fluid from his face. Shaking his

head, he moves to wail on Mike just as teachers reach the scene. Will is shoved out of the way by Mr. Rood, he and Mr. Eckley pulling the two away from each other. Mark flailed to land at least one other hit on Mike, Mike wiping at his bleeding lip.

"Something wrong, Mark?" He pants. "You *scared*?" Shaking his head, Mr. Eckley grabbed the arms of both Mike and Will, dragging them to the Office. Mr. Rood stayed back to rush every other kid back to class and control the still growling Mark Miller. Will was dropped into a chair in the lobby while Mike's form disappears around the corner of the nurse's office. Will struggled to gather his air, sending a shaky glare to the receptionist who had taken to scrutinizing Will from over her coke bottle glasses.

With a snooty huff, she turned back to her work, leaving Will to wait for the English teacher to come back. His fingertips brushed over the edge of one of the tapes and he found himself flipping it within the soft fabric of the pocket. Pulling out the Walkman, he slid the first tape into the compartment, shutting it and pulling on the headphones.

Now was as good a time as any. He presses play.

Hey, it's me. Sloane. Sloane Thomas.

Will almost threw off the headset, his breath catching in his throat.

*I know. Mental, right? Sloane Thomas live and in stereo talking to you from **beyond the grave**.*

Shaking his head, Will furrowed his brows, staring off at the tiled floors of the office. Sloane killed himself. This couldn't be real. Someone was obviously playing a trick on him. Sending a quick glance into the hall, Will made sure no one was watching him with a smug grin, laughing heartily as he gets worked up over a joke.

There was no one there.

Don't overreact. Don't adjust your Walkman. It's really me.

Will blinked violently to keep the obvious tears from falling from his eyes. A noise outside of the headset, sends him reeling, a choked gasp

escaping him as he turns to see Mike sitting in the chair just beside him. Will tears off the headset, panting, very aware of the countless glares he was getting. Mike sent Will a tired glance, his form hunched over.

"We're suspended." Will's nose wrinkles with the news. "Me?" Mike nods, sitting back in the chair. With a soft shrug, he reaches up to fiddle with the thick bandage over his lip.

"Yeah, 'e said it's because you were within the vicinity." Will glared at the floor, reaching over and swatting Mike's hand away from his bandage. Mike huffs a frustrated breath. "Within the vicinity?"

"Of the fight. Like you were closer than everyone else." Will makes a small sound of affirmation, his gaze never moving from the floor. Sitting back himself, he frowns.

"You didn't have to do that." Mike frowns, sending Will an odd look.

"You rather I let that bohunk *crush* you?"

"I'm not a baby, Mike. We're not 12 anymore."

"That's not what I meant, Will." Will crossed his arms much like a child. "Then stop buggin' out all the time." Mike stayed silent for a moment, watching Will's slouched posture and soft pout before snorting.

"Okay." Will looks at Mike, surprised at first. "Okay?" The freckled geek nods softly, letting his head rest on the wall.

"Yeah, promise." Will blinked before frowning. "You gave in too easy, I don't trust that." Laughing softly, Mike shook his head. Smiling hurt due to the cut on his lip, but actually talking to Will for the first time in months hurt even more. The two fall into silence, Mike staring at the ceiling and Will finally remembering the tape that waited to be played. Sloane's tape. Had all of the cassettes in the box belong to Sloane? What the hell would you talk about on 13 tapes?

Will opened his mouth to address Mike, but Mike spoke first, stuffing his hands into his pants pockets. "We're probably going to be here all day. Or-I mean-You could call Jonathan." Mike sighs through his

nose.

"I'm stuck here."

"Your dad-" Mike shook his head, clearing his throat. Nodding softly, Will fell silent. Mike gestured to the Walkman. "I won't bother you if you want to listen to that."

"I'm sorry I interrupted you in the first place-" Shaking his head, Will pulled the headset over his ears. Sending Mike a hesitant smile, he wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Don't get all sappy." Mike's laughter dies out behind the sound of Sloane's voice as Will pressed play.

No return engagements, no encore, and no fucking requests. You might wanna get some grindage and take a seat. This'll be a hard pill to swallow because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. Or more specifically, why my life ended.

People always say that a suicide victim always left a note. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas were so adamant that Sloane hadn't left one. Will felt himself smile at the thought of Sloane being so creative as to use cassettes instead of paper and pencil. And then he felt disgusted for even condoning it. This was a suicide note, not some stupid class project.

And if you're listening to this tape, well. Sloane laughs, humorlessly. You're one of the reasons why.

Will pressed the pause button, tearing the headset off of his head completely, the plastic burning against his ears. Shaking his head, he placed his hands over his eyes. Now he knew something about this whole situation had to be a mistake. He never did anything to Sloane. They were *best friends*. Will was nothing but kind to Sloane. A soft pat on Will's shoulder.

Looking over, he meets the glossy gaze of Mike.

"It only gets worse. Much worse."

Wait.

"I promise you, Will. *You didn't do anything.*"

The conversation from the day before rings through Will's ears as he frowns.

"You *knew*?" Will's voice comes off more hurt than he had intended. Mike pulls his hand away, folding them both on his lap. "I-" Shaking his head, he watches a teacher walk by.

"I wasn't supposed to say anything!" Meeting Will's gaze, he frowns. "I wasn't supposed to say anything-"

"But you *knew*. About the cassettes." Mike, having no other reply, sighs with a nod. Will feels anger bubbling up in his stomach, but kept his mouth shut knowing that nothing good would come of him yelling at Mike of all people. Along with the anger, somewhere under it, he felt relief. Knowing that someone else had gotten these besides himself. That this wasn't just some prank and someone other than himself had sat through it.

He sighed, rolling his fingers along the plastic. Putting them back onto his head, he shut his eyes and pressed the play button.

I'm not gonna spoil anything and tell you when your name comes up. Fear not though, if you received my box, your name will pop up. I promise.

Will found himself mumbling the word promise with the tape. Pulling one leg up onto the chair to sit on. He was going to come up. He received the tapes, did nothing, according to Mike; but his name would come up? Bullshit, he did do something. Will did something absolutely distasteful, was a complete narbo, and ended one of his closest friend's life.

Anyways, you must be getting pretty bored, so let's go over the rules, yeah?

Rules?

There are only two. Rule number one, you listen. Number two, you pass it on. Hopefully, neither will be easy, but knowing myself, I'll crack a joke every now and then.

Shaking his head, Will ignored the badgering rotten taste at the farthest part of his throat. Jokes in your suicide note?

You don't have to thank me. When you are done listening to all 13 sides, because as we all know, there are 13 sides to every story; rewind the tapes, put them back into the box, and pass them on to the next person. Easy, right?

Yeah, Will thought. In a weirdly sadistic kind of way. What happens to listener number thirteen? What if *he* was listener number thirteen? Even with all this proof, Will refused to believe that he was sitting in his High school office, listening to the voice of a boy who had just died more than a month before. It just didn't make any sense.

Oh! And you should've gotten a map. Creative, right? In a... Creepy way, I guess-You should have found it in your locker.

Will found himself grimacing, trying to remember if he had ever found a map in his locker. Turning to Mike, he opened and closed his mouth, trying to gather his words. Before he could finish, a folded pamphlet was being held out to him. Taking it, Will frowned at Sloane's signature on the outer fold.

I'll be mentioning various places in Hawkins, our beloved home. I can't force you to go and I know a couple of you can't drive, but if you'd like a little more insight, then I'd recommend you head for the stars. Whether you use a bike or your dad's BMW.

Will snorted, humorlessly.

Or you could... Throw the map away and I'd never know.

Will took this moment to map out the nearest trash bin. Across the room sitting idle and very empty was the receptionist's trash bin. Shaking his head, Will tightened his grip on the pamphlet.

In case you do decide to break the rules, I just want to put it out there that I did make copies of these tapes, and I left them with a trusted individual who, if this package doesn't make it through all of you, will release the tapes in a very public way.

Will's attention turned very dramatically to Mike, the boy only

shaking his head in reply, answering Will's question before it could even be born. Mike was just another reason. Or maybe, he was choosing not to say what role he had in all this. Will forced himself to tear his gaze away, glaring at the rug under the receptionist's shiny black loafers.

This was not a spur of the moment decision. Do not take me for granted. Not again.

Will frowned, tears again building in his eyes. Shaking his head, he mumbles, "But I didn't.!" A comforting pat on his shoulder pushes him to keep listening, despite being seconds away from throwing the tapes and the Walkman into the bin. He'd get Jonathan a new one.

Do what I say. Not more, not less. Be warned, you are being watched.

Will's stomach knots and the rotten taste at the back of his throat converts into the telltale flavor of bile and he forces himself not to relieve the feeling. Swallowing heavily, he drops his face into his hands. There were so many people acting strangely around him if he really thought about it. Jonathan, staring at the box as if he knew something, Jane delivering the box and *apologizing*. Mike wanting to reconnect just as Will receives the tapes?

Could he trust anyone right now? What was to say his mother wasn't in on it, too? Or Mr. Clarke from Middle School?

Put your finger on C and the other finger on 5. Bring them together.

Will hurried to open the map, laying it out as flat as he possibly could on his shaky lap. Placing his index fingers on the map, he brought them together onto a house he remembered all too well. From stupid sleepovers to dinners spent with a family he thought he knew well.

That's our first red star. You've arrived at my house in this shitty town where I threw my first and only party. And... Where I met Mark Miller; the subject of our first tape.

"Mark Miller?" Will whispered harshly, pressing stop. Beside him, Mike makes a sound of confirmation and Will feels his stomach lurch. Mark Miller's disheveled appearance, reckless behavior, and sudden

interest in Will all made sense now. Standing up from his chair, Will fixed his backpack onto his shoulders, giving Mike a determined look.

"Take me to C-5." He swallows as the Dungeon Master watches him in disbelief.

"Please."

3. cassette 1 - side a

"Yeah, I got it."

"No, Jonathan. You don't need to come, I'm going to-"

Will glances at Mike through the office window. His dark wavy hair shifts with the wind, his gaze on the sky above. It made him wonder what went through the Wheeler kid's mind anymore. Shaking his head, he returns his attention to the phone.

"I'm going to try to hang out with Mike."

"Emphasis on the try, I'll tell you if it's too much."

"No-Jona-I wasn't part of the fight! I was just close by so they thought I had something to do with it, y'know?"

"Well, *yeah*, but it's not even noon. I don't-I can't go home yet."

With a soft laugh, Jonathan finally gave in. "Fine. I'll just tell mom you stayed at school." A sigh of relief from Will.

"Really?"

"Really. Don't kick over any trashcans while you're out there." Will scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"I get too close to *one fight* and you think I've joined the Dark Side." Rustling on the other side of the line, motions that Jonathan was shaking his head. A couple chuckles later and they're saying their goodbyes. Replacing the telephone on the receiver, Will smiled softly at the receptionist only to receive a grimace in return. Letting his smile fall, he huffed, turning and leaving the office. You get too close. Just a *little* too close and your whole reputation gets flushed down the toilet.

Just yesterday, that woman was smothering Will in office candies and 'are you okay's. Now it was all pointless glares and harsh silences. Shoving the front door of the school, Will frowned when Mike's form jumped at the sound. Will held out the pamphlet to Mike, the boy

shaking his head.

"I know where it is."

Stuffing the map into his back pocket, Will made quick haste of climbing onto the back of the familiar bike. He threw away what little of his pride he had left and placed his hands carefully around Mike's midsection. Mike pushes off, pedaling quickly. The difference between wind blowing through his hair from a car window compared to a bike was a welcome change, Will taking deep breaths of the fresh air. Sending Mike a glance, he cleared his throat.

"So you've done this?" Mike grunts, slowing to turn a corner. "Done what?"

"The tapes? And... Going to the places?" Mike's head bobs in affirmation, a solemn silence falling over the teen. Will lets the information sink in before asking his next question. "So... You're one of the reasons." Mike again only nodded.

"A lot of us are." Will asked his next question quicker than he could take a breath. "What did you do?" Scoffing, Mike shook his head.

"Listen to the tapes and you'll know."

"Why wait when I can just ask you?" Mike stopped pedaling, resting one of his feet on the concrete of the road. Sending a glance to the boy behind him, he sighed. "Sloane wants to tell his story, Will. He wants you to *listen*." Will opens his mouth to reply, Mike cutting him off.

"To him. Not me." He gestures to a house across the street, limply. "We're here." Will turned to take in the building, his gaze landing on the window that belonged to Sloane's room. The sky was mostly clear, free of any clouds, providing enough light to see and as far as he could tell, most of Sloane's belongings were still in there. As he pulled the headset over his ears, Sloane's mother entered the room, her face just as broken as it was the day she told Will the news.

When the school announced it the next day, Will was already numb to the knowledge. It had already made loops around his brain and

filled his mind with toxic thoughts. He went through denial, so much denial. So while others ran around, crying alligator tears and huddling with their friends, Will retreated into himself. He put all his energy into his schoolwork. Stopped going to art class as that brought too many memories. And every other day, he'd watch the windows, hoping that Sloane would walk by. Watching the door, hoping he'd step in. But how do you come back after something like attempted suicide?

It was just a party. I didn't know it was the beginning of the end. Mark? You're awkward and sarcastic but somehow weaseled your way into the popular crowd. You were an idiot. The dumbest kid in the class. I can say that, 'cause I'm dead.

Will shook his head, looking away as the joke fell flat in his head.

You needed help, like most do. And you knew I was the best you'd get at a tutor in that class. I wish I could say I felt bad for you. But let's take a step back. You were dating my best friend Elena. Who, at the time, was my only friend.

Will remembered Elena. She was a tall girl with bone straight hair that cascaded down to her mid-back. Parents thought it looked tacky but a lot of kids thought it looked cool. Will thought it was a lot of work. Her eyes were wide and amber colored, staring through anyone who dared to grab her attention.

Will remembered a girl he was scared to death to talk to. Elena was freaky.

That's where the trouble started. When our eyes met and you decided our paths would always cross. No matter what.

Mark decided. Will felt his frown deepen. Shifting, he moved to sit on the curb, Mike following him from a good enough distance. The freckled teen takes a hesitant seat beside him and Will nods.

Elena was a good person to have around when you had no desire to talk to anyone. The best friend to have if you wanted to be invisible. But she left. Elena was the kind of friend that couldn't be replaced. Even by the guy, she left behind. You're not a bad guy, Mark. You never were a bad

guy.

You just did a bad thing. And as humans, we all make mistakes.

Will found his mind drifting into the darkest parts of his mind, opening the archive of rejected memories, finding himself back at the party. He'd tagged along with Dustin and Lucas. Mike was getting a ride with Jane.

Will was standing awkwardly in the doorway as Dustin and Lucas introduced themselves to the doormen. At the time, Will was still quite small, so he sneaked by, snaking his way through the crowd of sweaty teen bodies and hiding in the kitchen. If he was completely honest, the only socializing he did was with the plates of snacks littered around the kitchen. That was until a certain curly-haired boy sneaked his way into the kitchen as well.

No one else came into the kitchen as they were all chugging beer and getting sick in every room but the bathroom. It was grodie, but it was a teen house party. It was fun in a weird nauseating kind of way. Will was sitting on the counter, waiting for Dustin and Lucas to be ready to go. He couldn't walk home, his mother would *never* allow that. A bag of Doritos sat in his arms half-finished because of his constant snacking. Whoever's house this was will need a big grocery day.

. . .

There are soft footsteps behind him, but he plays them off as another drunk couple cutting through. His gaze stayed on the window across from him.

"Wow, way to get comfortable, Byers." A feminine voice calls from behind him. Turning, he eyes the person in the low lighting before giving a nervous grin. He could see the silhouette of another standing beside her, but he paid them no mind.

"Oh-Hey, Elena. So-Sorry, I'm not much of a party person." Elena shakes her head, stepping into the light. A red solo cup sits in her hand, sloshing as she makes her way over. Will struggles not to take in the alcohol's smell. The person who shadowed Elena took the long way, standing on the opposite side of Will. Will could now tell they

were a male, a bit taller than himself. Curly hair with a left part and the first thought that entered Will's head was 'do the curls feel as silky as they look'?

Will gives the kid a polite nod before stuffing another chip into his mouth. Reaching out, Elena takes a couple chips of her own. Will sent her a small grimace, pulling the bag closer to his chest. It was so much easier being normal around drunk Elena rather than sober Elena. Placing a chip in her mouth, Elena leaned on the counter.

"Will meet Sloane. Sloane, this is The Great, Will Byers." The guy Will now knew as Sloane sent the girl a tired glance. "So I'm meeting the face of greatness in Hawkins?" Nodding, Elena took a sip from her cup.

"Uh, *doy*. He was gone for like ever and everyone thought he was dead. Then he comes back, rosy-cheeked and doe-eyed, looking like he just came from taking a short walk." Will groaned at the summary of the worst week of his life. "Honestly, it wasn't that big of a deal, y'know?" Will tried, Elena snorting.

"Come on, I lost a couple pounds. That has to count for something." Elena shook her head.

"With someone as small as you, Billiam, a couple pounds is *everything*. You came back the same size! Maybe an inch taller-OH!" She places a hand on Sloane's shoulder, smiling brightly. "Slo's new to town. Just moved in. Help him make at least *one* friend, would ya?" Will opened his mouth to answer just as Elena skipped to the door.

"Later days!"

...

I made a couple new friends at that party. You being one of them. Did you think of me of a friend, Mark? I thought we'd hit it off pretty well. Well... Well enough until you ran away to tackle and chortle with your preppy friends-I believe one was Mr. Sinclair himself.

"Mr. Sinclair... Lucas?" Will mumbled, sending a glance to Mike. Nodding softly, Mike kept his gaze strong on a pebble on the ground.

. . .

Sloane found his way onto the counter, sitting beside Will in comfortable silence. The duo shared the one bag of Cool Ranch Doritos, Sloane's favorite kind. Will tilted the large bag of chips towards the new kid after every chip he threw into his own mouth. Sloane's legs dangled off the edge of the counter while Will sat with his legs crossed under himself. Looking down at Sloane's feet, Will grunted at the shoe. The checkered pattern, in the colors black and white, he guessed. He'd seen them before.

In a store?

"What kind of shoes are those?" He mumbles, meeting Sloane's gaze. Smiling softly, Sloane held his leg out, letting his shoe enter the light.

"Vans. They're expensive to the max." Will hummed in surprise, glancing back at the shoe.

"Really?" Nodding, Sloane grinned. "Took my entire life's savings."

. . .

But don't worry. I found someone to pass the time with. Much better company.

Will smiled, dipping his head shyly.

I bet you're wondering why I'm telling this part of the story. This can't be the reason you were put on the tapes. It's too good of an ending. And you'd be right. It gets worse, Mark. There is a beginning to every story and this is the beginning to yours.

I think you remember what you did, same as your friends do. Same as the rest of the school. Same as me. That I'll remember all the way to the last minute. To my last breath.

It was a long time coming; I guess. I'd tutor you every day after school in the library and you'd drop some stupid flirty joke. Never suggestive, but always wholesome. Or so I thought.

It was cute. You were cute.

...

"Was this party meant for you to make friends?" Will finally asked after they had finished the large bag of chips. Sloane nodded, taking a sip from the clear glass he'd found in the cabinet. Will had also learned that he just ate the poor new kid out of house and home. He wouldn't admit that it was mostly himself and his stress eating, but he admitted to eating more than just a couple bags of chips.

Sloane offered Will a real drink after a while and to Sloane, a real drink meant the coldest bottles of pop in the fridge. He mentioned his parents saving them for something special, but he figured his first real friend was as special a time as any.

"Cheers, Willy Billy." A bewildered look took Will's face as he glared at the glass being held out to him. "Willy Billy?" Sloane nodded, grinning from ear to ear. Will found himself staring at the single dimple in his cheek that sat illuminated in the light. Lifting his own glass, he smiled tentatively.

"Cheers."

...

I remember one specifically. You had asked for help with your Calculus and I had no problem there; I found Calculus very easy. But only 30 minutes into the first section, you turn to me with one of the cheesiest grins I'd ever seen. And remember I had to live with my own cheesy grins.

Will snorted.

And you said, "Without you, I'm like a null set, empty." It had nothing to do with the material we were working on, but I was speechless. It was the first time you'd won, but certainly not the last time.

*Your second victory was on a day like any other. You ignored me for most of the day, but as soon as the final bell rang, you ran to my locker. I turned around and you were full-blown **sprinting** at me. It was hard to understand a word that came out of your mouth, but I got the gist. You wanted to do something other than study.*

And my day wasn't going all that great, so I agreed. That was your second

victory; *Getting me to actually follow you somewhere other than the library. The third came much later.*

You took me to the arcade. A childish first date if you ask me, Mark, but with the jokes you always spouted; I wasn't surprised. We played a couple rounds of Street Fighter. You lost every time as I recall. I'm not one to brag, I promise.

Will took a moment to glance over at his friend who still sat quietly beside him. It surprised him that he hadn't left yet. Mike looked just as awake as he had that morning, sitting motionlessly. He could have been mistaken for a statue if it wasn't for the slight rise and fall of his chest. His posture was stiff, arms resting on the highest peak of his knees. His eyes were trained on something that Will couldn't see, something far away. Looking beyond the obvious, Mike was past tired. He was exhausted. Reaching out, Will placed a hand on Mike's knee.

Mike finally looked at him for the first time in the short time they'd been there. Will smiles, genuinely this time and they share a silent nod.

*But if I said it ended there, I'd be lying. Do you remember what everyone said happened? The rumors that you help spread? I think it went a little like... I threw myself at you. **Begged** you, was it? Well, I'm here to tell the truth. What really happened.*

Will always tried his best to avoid rumors but when he had heard that, he'd admit, he avoided Sloane for a little while. It seemed like more than just a rumor at the time and with Sloane being so new,

It was easy to believe.

You asked me a favor that night. I could tell you were scared, despite there being no one around on that street. But something scared you. And I thought we were friends. So I vowed to do my best by you. You asked me what I thought about gay people, Mark.

Shaking his head, Will sighed. That dreaded question.

I told you; I had no quarrels with them. That they were people same as

me. That I, myself, was gay. You looked surprised. Even told me I was lying, but I wasn't. And it's not that I wasn't scared of the outcome. I knew what would happen if I came out openly as gay.

But you looked so desperate. I couldn't do anything but be honest. And in return, you were honest with me. You admitted to liking guys long before you met me. You tried to hide it, but I knew you were crying.

*To this day, I want to feel bad for you. I can't get that pathetic image of you out of my head. Crying, telling me you felt conflicted for not loving girls the way you were **supposed** to. You asked me for the chance. The chance to know what it was like to be with a boy.*

Don't do it, Will pleaded. Please don't do it.

I couldn't agree to that. Even after losing hope... I'd never do that. But I helped you in another way, I think.

Will folded his hands over his eyes, hoping the force would rub the image of the two out of his mind.

We kissed. There I said it. I know, I know. It's not as exciting as the rumors you all were told. But not all gays want to get in your pants, you tards.

Will let out the breath he was holding, letting himself fall flat against the grassy patch of the sidewalk. His chest rose and fell at a slow pace. Carefully. As though if he didn't, he'd forget how to breathe altogether. This was only on the first tape and he'd already learned so much about Mark alone. Just how much would he learn over the course of all these tapes about the people around him? He thought he could read right through people, finding it easy to understand them; but here he was, learning that Mark Miller, the straightest mindless git to attend Hawkins High, was actually gay and hiding it from everyone. Will would call him a coward, but then he'd have to admit his own cowardice.

He can feel a shift beside him and knows Mike replicated his position. It would've been enough to pull a smile onto his face on any other day. Like a weird game of Simon Says.

William Says.

*You walked me home, like a gentleman, and left without a word. You probably said goodbye. I can't be bothered to remember. But that was **all** that happened that day.*

And you avoided me for the next week. We never talked. I'll admit, it kinda hurt to be dropped like that, but... There was no arrangement. We weren't a thing and you passed your math exam. So there was no reason for us to cross paths ever again. Or at least I hoped so. A lot of you probably remember that day. In fact, it was the highlight of the town for about two-and-a-half weeks.

Will waited by the double doors for Sloane's mother's Ford Mustang to pull into the parking lot. Neither Will nor Sloane had their license yet and Will wasn't sure if he ever wanted his license. The thought of driving kind of sort of scared him. Not that he would say that out loud. Dustin and Lucas walk by, the curly haired geek waving softly at the Mushroom. Lucas didn't even seem to notice Will. That didn't really bother him even if it should. The remainder of the basketball jocks were in an uncharacteristic huddle by the steps, Mark Miller standing at the center. They seemed to be waiting for something. Or someone.

It was a beautiful day. I remember the sun was at its highest, shining down and leaving no shadows anywhere but under the tallest Oak trees. I felt especially happy that day because my parents were finally allowing me to go to a sleepover. Apparently, they're not just for the ladies.

A breeze blew by as the familiar blue Mustang slowed in the Parking Lot. Will grinned, rocking on the balls of his feet. Nearby, the Jocks seemed to grow rowdy, making a big ruckus as they took turns shoving and pushing Mark. Will found it really odd at that point and anxiety crept on the back of his neck.

It was my mom's turn to drop me off, and we listened to David Bowie the whole ride to school. Not a big Bowie fan, but whatever makes my mother happy.

Will watched as Sloane clambered out of the vehicle, waving his mother off as she drove away. It was a fairly low car, so Will

understood the struggle. He didn't know a lot about what Sloane's family did for a living at that time, but he well knew they both worked and at the same place. Once their eyes met, a bright cheesy grin spread across Sloane's face. They share a wave.

I saw my friend out on the school porch, waiting like a dweeb. He was standing just a couple feet away from you and your friends, Mark. That day, I thought it was just a coincidence. It was just a coincidence that you and your friends just happened to be gathered in the front of the school that day. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sloane made his way across the parking lot, one of his many notebooks clutched in his left hand. He did something different with his hair that day, not that Will could tell, of course. It could've been the lighting that made Sloane's hair bounce with each step he took. That caused it to recoil even when he pulled it back to greet someone on the way to the entrance. Will couldn't tell; but he could tell something was wrong when Mark took a step forward, blocking Sloane from getting any closer to Will.

I was so close. I was right there. Sloane takes a shaky breath. Me and my friend? We could've gone to the art room like we planned. We would've talked about the sleepover and what I needed to bring. What art projects we had to finish and the stupid crush he had. But we didn't. Because of you.

Will froze in his spot, watching as Mark wrapped his arm around Sloane's shoulders, dragging him over to the group of Jocks. Will should've done something. He could've walked over, if he had any confidence in his short little body, and pulled Sloane away. He could've, but he didn't. He watched. Sloane obviously had more friends than lonely old Will Byers. And Will was willing to share because no one should be robbed of getting to know such a great person.

I hoped you were just introducing me to the team. I wanted this to just be a simple introduction. I may not have acted like it, Mark, but I was scared. After weeks of never talking, you drag me to a group of your friends? Using that baritone Captain of the Basketball team voice? Not even the strongest magic in the world could convince me that you were just being nice.

"Sloane!"

"Tho~mas!"

"What's good, Noodle Scalp?!"

Will felt himself smile at the nicknames though hesitantly. Somewhere deep down, he knew it wouldn't end well, but he wanted to believe Sloane's good nature could rub off on the jocks. That they finally were more than just Ken dolls running around making a fool of themselves. Sweating everywhere and knocking each other to the ground. Hoping did nothing for him; because the next minute, a blank stare replaced Sloane's bright smile. Directed at Mark.

You asked me how I was doing. I told you as good as I could be being the new kid. Your friends laughed, I couldn't, but I smiled at each of them. Someone slammed a heavy hand against my back and all the air in my chest was gone with your next words.

"Come on, Thomas. You don't have to lie to us. How's it feel?" Will grimaced. He misunderstood the question back then, but now... It made too much sense. And it was sickening.

Sloane's voice grew angry as he continued. *I said I had no idea what you were talking about. I gave you a look I hoped you would understand. A look that shouted, shut the fuck up, Mark Miller. Don't say another word. I would never do this to you.*

Will couldn't bring himself to walk away as the group morphed into a circle around Sloane and Mark. Mark still wore the same shit-eating grin, practically glowing with self-worth. With confidence and pride. Fear hunched Sloane's form. His head snapped back-and-forth mapping out the placement of every jock around him and that's when Will was sure. This was not a group of friends. And it was much too late for someone his size to step in. He'd be crushed.

"How's it feel to be an outcast? The only one of your kind, a sinner?"

A sinner, Mark. I wanted to spout how we were both sinners at that point. How our kiss was vanilla compared to whatever the fuck you wanted me to do. But... What kind of friend would I be if I outed you like that?

Will swallowed heavily as a group of bystanders formed around the circle of jocks. People whooped and whispered as Sloane turned to leave. No one moved out of his way.

"Let me go." Mark laughed.

"What's wrong, Thomas? You scared?"

Are you scared, Sloane? Too scared to stand up for yourself and all the others like you who needed a voice?

"Leave me alone, Mark."

"I can't just *leave you alone*. A problem like this needs to be dealt with."

"What problem, Mark? Drop the 411!" A Jock shrieked, crazed laughter leaving his lips. Mark glanced at them, wetting his lips before turning back to Sloane. Taking a step forward, he closed the space between him and Sloane.

What was my problem, Mark? Do you remember?

"Our new kid, Sloane Thomas, is a fag." The yard comes alive with gasps and calls of disgust. Will felt attacked, the slurs weighing down on his shoulders. He couldn't manage to look at Sloane, his gaze stuck on the sea of students shaking their fists at the curly-haired boy.

"A dirty one at that, right, Captain? Tell everyone what he did to you!" Another Jock calls, his voice laced with hatred.

I don't know if you feel bad. And at this point... I don't know if it would change anything. But, I saw pure anger in your eyes at that moment. Maybe hate towards yourself, for opening up to someone who didn't want you in the first place.

Mark took another step forward, the smile gone from his lips. Instead, a deep frown contorted his face and left Sloane with nowhere else to go. "He had the nerve to," Mark shoves Sloane to the ground, a soft crack echoing through the crowd. They'd sprained his wrist. "Force himself on me."

I had enough gall to say one thing, no matter how late it was to defend myself.

"Liar! You-fucking liar!"

The crowd laughs, at Sloane's messy cries. Will knew this wasn't an attempt to deny that he was gay, but rather to clear the slander that had just been placed on his name. If Will knew anything about Sloane, it was that if he could have nothing else, he'd want no lies ever attached to him. Being gay was not a lie, but a secret he'd rather forget existed.

Who were they going to believe? The crying boy on the ground who was a disgusting faggot? Or Mark Miller, the truthful, the king. The trustworthy.

"Disgusting!"

"You faggot!"

"God hates your kind! Go to hell!"

So I wasn't just the Gay New Kid, I was the Slutty Gay New Kid, if a boy can be called slutty.

Sloane and Will's gaze met at that moment, a cry for help in Sloane's eyes. Will only ran, throwing the school door open and leaving him behind. To take in the harassment alone.

Will let out a choked sob, placing his palms against his temples.

Thank you, Mark Miller, for the fun we had before... Everything. Thank you for my first First Date, and my first kiss and for the pickup lines that I didn't completely hate. I'm mad, but not at you. I'm angry with myself for ever believing that coming out to someone was a good idea. For trusting you with that information.

Will's hands moved to his eyes, the tears dripping through his fingers and running across his cheeks. His chest faltered with each strangled breath, gasping shallowly. He was loud, and he was sure that the families getting ready for their days could hear him falling apart, and at some point would call the cops. Not even the boy beside him could

fathom why he was losing his mind over *someone else's* tape.

But Mike couldn't possibly know first hand what Will did that day. It was more than just walking away. He turned his back on his friend. Left him behind and decided that ignoring his existence was the best thing to do to avoid the humiliation of being caught in the same vicinity of 'the kid who threw himself at Mark Miller'. He probably witnessed what the person on each tape did and turned a blind eye. Will was worse than any of them.

A rumor spread based on a night that didn't quite go the way you'd planned it ruined what was and is the rest of my life. You'll see how so, if you keep listening.

Stick around, Mark. We're not quite finished with you yet. A lot of you listening to these tapes probably didn't mean to let me down, but you did. See you on side B.

A soft click let Will know that the recording was over, his hands reaching up and throwing off the headset. He forced himself to sit up, his vision still blurred by the tears that wouldn't stop running. He couldn't see much, but he could tell when a car stopped just a couple feet from Mike. Will kept his arms wrapped tightly around his knees as the footsteps approached. The grass shifts beside him, Mike grunts.

"Hey..." Is his small greeting to the anonymous character. The footsteps stop in front of Will and pebbles shift with the sound of them crouching down. A hand grips his shoulder and he finally looks up to meet the careful gaze of Jonathan Byers.

"Will." Shaking his head, Will sniffed. "It was my-I walked away. Why did I walk away?" Mike looks between the two Byers, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"Walked away?"

"You have to stick this through, Will. You still have 13 other tapes to listen to." Was Jonathan's careful reply. Will swallows, ignoring the fact that his older brother just admitted to knowing about the tapes. He knew he did, somewhere at the back of his mind. Jonathan didn't hide it all that well. Looking down, Will snuffles. He wrings his hands,

feeling his knuckles shift with each turn. "What if I do it again-What if," He blinks away fresh tears with a soft gasp.

"What if I was there for all of them? And I just-Walked away?" Mike shakes his head.

"Will, you did nothing wrong-" Will's gaze is like fire when he turns to Mike, frowning deeply. "Bullshit, I *walked away*! That's the worst thing you can do to someone in need!" Jonathan pulls his hand from Will's shoulder, shaking his head softly.

"I guess... All you can do is be there for him now." Will opens his mouth to reply, but Jonathan nods. "I know it may seem too late, but this is his final request. You'll only be hurting him by *not* listening, Will."

Pulling the Walkman from his pocket, Will stares at it in silence, distaste dripping from his frown. He takes a moment to run his fingers over the plastic glass of the compartment. Sloane's final wish. Will's only way of helping Sloane rest just the slightest bit better in the afterlife. His fingers are quick to click the eject, grabbing the tape and flipping it around to the B side. Placing it back inside, he shuts the door, meeting Mike's and Jonathan's gaze.

With a soft nod, Jonathan stands to his feet. He grabs Mike's bike and brings it to his car, mumbling a soft thank you when Mike opens the trunk door. Stuffing the bike inside, he motions for everyone to hop inside.

"Side B means you're ready for Dave's Diner. Let's go."

4. cassette 1 - side b

Welcome back! It's kinda sick that you're still here. In a good way, of course. Are you having fun? What kinda snack are you munching on? I recommend Cool Ranch Doritos. Nothing's better.

Will swayed with the movements of Jonathan's car, the headset and Walkman sitting in his lap. His gaze was stuck on the toes of his converses, his mind stopping and chiming at a constant low hum. Drifting from the radio was Purple Rain by Prince. The volume was too low to hear the lyrics, but the instrumental kept everyone's emotions under control in the tenseness of the car. The tenseness that came after Will ignored each of their attempts to talk, managing only a soft grunt or one-word reply. Tenseness that both Mike and Jonathan could understand and didn't blame Will for. It finally reached noon but Will wasn't exactly keen on going home *just yet*.

Will's mind was on a constant whirlwind of taking in some information and denying others. Of questions unanswered and what other questions were to emerge from the other tapes. That was until his brain clocked out and became nothing else but pulsing dead weight in his skull. His mind has never been on hardcore overdrive before, his eyes burning with each blink.

There was a lot he wanted to know. *A lot*. But most of all, Will wanted to know which tape was his, despite not having all of them in his possession. He wasn't going to skip forward because he wanted to know each person that hurt Sloane and what they did, but it wouldn't hurt to know which was his. It had only been a couple of hours and he was only on the B side of the first tape, but he couldn't help but feel like Sloane's pain was his as well. If Sloane wouldn't be mad at them, Will would take that job. He was already prepared to snap at Mark if the jock even looked at him sideways during school in a couple of days.

Heaving a sigh, Will let his head rest back on the soft fabric of the seat. A flash of red in his peripheral told him to turn his gaze. Sitting beside him was Sloane, arms folded limply across his chest. His expression was light, but not smiling. He looked a bit confused to the point of his eyebrows being furrowed, a soft frown on his lips. He

looked the same as he did the last day Will had seen him. Hair long enough to reach his shoulders, donned in one of his favorite red pull-overs tucked into stonewashed jeans. Turning to look at Will, he shakes his head.

"I don't even like that stupid diner. The only good thing on the menu is the smoothies." Will quirked his head, curiously before the car stopped. He and the Sloane manifestation turned to the front of the car, staring at Jonathan, a hesitant smile on the young man's face.

"Okay, Will. We're here." Will's head dips softly, turning to see that Sloane had disappeared. Removing his bag, Will grasped the Walkman, climbing quickly out of the vehicle. Mike moved to get out as well, Sloane now leaning on the hood of the car.

"Wow. Is Wheeler *finally* caring about your mental breakdowns? I don't know if I should be okay with this competition." Will bit his cheek to hide his inappropriate amusement. Clearing his throat, he leads the way into the diner, taking his time to take in the overall appearance. The bright colors were like missiles of discomfort to Will's already sore eyes. The black and white tiles on the ground, placed in a heinous, uncoordinated pattern. Red and white tiles on the tables in a checkerboard fashion. Thankfully, the walls were all painted in a single solid color. Maroon. In the farthest corner sat a jukebox, primed and ready for a quarter. Moving out of the way of the door, Will pulled the headset on. Sending a glance to Mike, he shook his head.

"If I sit at a booth, don't sit at the same one. Okay?" Mike frowned.

"Are you sure?" Will nodded. "Yeah. I have to try to... Get a grasp on my emotions, y'know?"

"On my own."

With an unsure nod, Mike approached the counter, taking a seat on one of the brightly colored stools. He twisted the rotatable seat back and forth, his hands folded on the surface. Pressing play, Will waited by the door for his next directions.

I bet your wondering who's next, right? What they did. Is it you? What did

you do? Maybe you did something cruel. Or maybe you didn't do anything at all and you wish you did. I hate to remind you but... I'm dead.

Friendship is a complicated thing, right? Like, am I close enough to this person to open up-are we homies-or are they just another person who'll forget my name within the next month? Airheads find it easier to have groups of friends, I think.

Listen, I hate small talk. I'm not going to spend 10 minutes making you wait for the next person's name, because that's what you're all waiting for. That's what you're all here for. One of my friends during sophomore year was an Airhead. But it was understandable and she wore it proudly.

Jane Hopper, Pro-Climber of the Popularity Ladder. Welcome to your tape.

A waitress approached Will, notepad in hand and a shy smile on her lips. The cherry lip balm coating them looked like they were sucking the life out of the feature. She wore what Dave's Diner considered it's *Bangin' Look*. See, Dave's Diner was decorated to impersonate the 50s. Her skirt fanned out to resemble a poodle skirt and Will almost feared for his toes when she skated carefully towards him. Stumbling to a stop, she met his hazel irises with her own chocolate ones, apologetically. From a closer distance, Will could now tell who the girl was. He didn't return the smile, but paused the Walkman, waving lightly.

"Hi, Tami." He managed as she regained her balance. Brushing her dark brown hair over her shoulder, she sighed. "When I told my old man I needed a job, I didn't think he'd make me work in this dump, yannow?" She complained, popping the gum she had hiding in her cheek. With a tossed glance over her shoulder, she leaned on the half wall Will was harboring. This was the usual Tami, not the shy, apologetic one that he almost lost his toes to. Smiling softly, Will shrugged.

"You take what you can get, right?" She laughed.

"Yeah, sure." Tami White. Or Tamsin to the many teachers that she hated, especially the Principal. She was the captain of the cheerleading squad at Hawkins High. She was great at it, and still

managed to balance all of her classwork as well. She was apparently the face of what Hawkins teen girls were supposed to look like as all Jane talked about was 'having the same lip gloss as Tami White' or 'needing to have the new jean skirt that Tami White wore to school that day'. As far as Will knew, her father worked for the Mayor and was loaded so she could basically get whatever she wanted within reason. He supposed that her needing a job had less to do with money and more to do with needing something to do during the colder months.

Personality-wise, she was nice enough.

Clearing her throat, she tapped her pen on the notepad. "You stayin' or goin'?" Will sent a wary glance at all the booths before mumbling that he was staying. Nodding, she scribbled on the paper.

"Okay, Will Byers," Though it sounded more like *Byas*. "Where are you placin' your tushie? You came at a good time, every seat's empty." Will could see that clearly. The diner was a ghost town. Shifting nervously, he quirked his head.

"Do you know where Jane used to sit? When she came here?" Nodding absentmindedly, Tami pointed to a booth just over her shoulder with the butt of her pen.

"Yeah, it's the *sacred* seat. Jane will come in once every day to make sure no one is sitting there." Nodding, she narrowed her eyes. "It's scary seein' the glare she gives to the kids who sit there."

"Though, you two are like Brother and Sister or somethin' now, right?" Will hesitated before nodding. "You should be fine." She finished, spinning around and leading him to the booth in the very back. She was a little steadier at stopping this time, watching Will slide into the red leather seat. She placed a hand on her hip, gesturing to him with the pen.

"You just call me when you figure out what you're orderin'." And with that she was gone, stumbling off and stopping by Mike. From where Will was sitting, they seemed to be having an engaged one-sided conversation, a bright smile bedazzling Tami's face. Mike's fingertips tapped anxiously at the bar, giving the tawny-skinned female short

answers. His form was stiff, keeping his gaze on the napkin dispenser sitting in front of him. As if like clockwork, Will pressed the play button, pulling his hands up to open the menu sitting on the table.

Jane and I met Sophomore Year. It wasn't like fate or anything. It was just a group project that started off with four people and ended up being two. I think you can imagine why the other two, who happened to be guys, left the group.

*She told me about this diner that her father introduced her to. She said the smoothies were, excuse my french, **bitchin'** and if I didn't have one I was a mouthbreather.*

Will smiled at that, his gaze on the Sides as he picked at the corner of the plastic booklet.

*I didn't want to be a mouthbreather, so I tagged along on one of her trips. It wasn't all that bad. I walked in with no friends and left **with** one. The food was crap, but I stayed for the freedom it gave me.*

You all know Jane. The 5 foot 4 girl with massive spunk and clothing that you'd only find on the mean streets of Chicago. Who's glare makes you stop in your tracks and piss your pants.

This is where the story really begins, I think. The story of Dave's Diner and the friendship we built in the building. Even after the project, we made it our ritual to meet there after school for 40 minutes. It was just us and the smoothies and empty promises that would eventually crash and burn like the fads of the 70s.

But if you could ever guess, someone joined our duo! We became The Three Musketeers and suddenly I was overwhelmed with the number of people who wanted to actually be around me. Now it was Jane, Sloane, our smoothies and a bottle of pop for the Dungeon Master, Michael Wheeler.

Will blinked, frowning at the small icon of a hamburger. His stomach filled with uneasiness as a soft tickle spread from his shoulder blades to the back of his neck. He turns slowly, meeting the attentive gaze of Mike in the distance. Will froze, ignoring the want to frown or even the word that bubbled at the base of his chest. 'What?' Mike's gaze

was indecipherable. Will couldn't tell if he was worried, waiting for Will to start crying, or if the smaller of the two was simply over thinking it; Mike was looking *through* him. They stared in silence, neither saying a word, the frown that Will had tried to will away, taking his face. A cold ghost-like tap on his shoulder and he turned to stare into the hesitant eyes of Sloane. Will's frown deepened as he was pulled into a memory that wasn't his.

. . .

He pulled open the door and found himself again in the Diner. It seemed brighter somehow, lighter. How the world felt to Will before Sloane died even with all of the rumors. The booths were all filled and each stool at the bar had an animated person sitting in it, yelling jokes and chattering with people that they'd never met before and probably would never speak to again. That was Dave's aura. A place to make friends. A place where you could be as free and loud as you wanted because no one cared who you were. Only what you ordered and what songs you listened to. As Will took in the stark difference of the place, the door chimed behind him. Sloane stepped past him, not even acknowledging his existence, grinning from ear to ear. At the sacred booth, Jane sat with Mike.

Mike waved Sloane over, sitting opposite of Jane. "Hurry up!" Sloane seemed to glide around the restaurant, nodding to the waitress at a booth and sending a quick greeting to the chef. A couple hellos came from others in the restaurant, Sloane laughing in reply. He received a kind pat on the shoulder from a man leaving the establishment, his stomach full and spirits light, before sliding into the chair beside the Paladin. A smoothie is slid onto the table by the waitress. Kiwi-Strawberry. Sloane immediately takes a long sip. Swallowing, he turns to address Mike.

"I can't help but notice, you took my spot." Mike scoffed.

"You're like 10 minutes late! Better luck next time, *Ramen Noodle*." Reaching across the table, Jane patted Sloane's arm. "It's okay. You're a very pretty Ramen Noddle." Mike scowled, picking at the basket of fries at the center of the table.

"*Handsome*, El. You call boys handsome."

Jane narrowed her eyes. "Does handsome... Mean pretty?" Sloane weighed his hands, shrugging softly. "I don't think so..?" He mumbled, sending a glance to Mike. Shaking his head, Mike turned to Jane.

"No, but I know you don't call a boy *pretty*." Jane was silent with thought, looking between the two boys. Straightening her posture, she pulled her smoothie closer and took an exaggerated sip. Swallowing, she turned to Sloane.

"Well, *I* do. Sloane is a pretty boy."

. . .

Will blinked and both the memory and Sloane were gone. Shaking his head, he breathed uneasily. He always wondered what Mike and Jane were doing on the days they turned down an offer to hang out with the party. Dustin always said it was because they were 'hiding behind some building *mashing*'. At the time, though, Mike and Jane were on one of their regularly planned breaks, so Will knew it couldn't possibly be that. As quickly as he grew suspicious, they'd started snaking their way back into the equation. Missing a couple sleepovers here and there until none were missed at all. And they started dating again, but Mike was... Different. He'd overthink his answers or never speak at all.

Will squinted out the window beside his booth, eyeing Jonathan's car. The teen rested on the hood of the Ford, talking to Jane. She looked distraught, almost hurried, but Jonathan was calm in comparison and lightly tapping his foot. Will was sure she knew he was in there at her sacred booth, but not once did she look at him or the building. She seemed concerned, but not enough to check for herself. Once Jonathan calmed her down, she turned on her heels, leaving the way she came. Will could see a glimpse of Mark Miller across the street.

I got too comfortable. I made myself a daily reminder to go to that Diner. A little yellow sticky note in the mirror, so to speak. I don't think Jane felt the same way, though. She was the first to stop coming around. At the time, it was for good reason. She needed to be there for her family. I didn't hold that against her, she came whenever she could.

. . .

"No Jane?" Mike shook his head, fingertips dancing along the condensation of his pop. Nodding, Sloane managed a sad smile. Shrugging softly, Mike glanced over at Sloane. They still sat on the same side of the booth, as they would any other day.

"I can tell something's wrong. I can always tell. She gets this weird look on her face and she never looks you in the eye." Mike described, talking with his hands.

"She rarely talks, doesn't eat."

Reaching over, Sloane patted Mike's shoulder.

"Hey. It's okay. Jane's way cool *and* she's strong. Just show her you're willing to listen and I think she'll come around." Mike nodded, with a tentative grin. "Yeah. Yeah, thanks, Slo."

"No problem. Cheers?"

"Cheers."

. . .

But it was when she wouldn't even talk to me in the halls, that I knew something was wrong. Not even a glance to let me know she still thought about the get-togethers we had planned after school. But it's okay. After a while, she grew tired of letting me stew in self-pity, trying to figure out what I did wrong.

*She **told** me what I did wrong the last day she showed up for Smoothies.*

Will took a shaky breath, the salt shaker in one hand and the pepper in the other. He slid them back and forth between his hands using the sleek table to his advantage. He didn't watch each reason happen. He didn't see Jane go storming into the Diner, ignoring the chimed greeting from the chef and waitress. He didn't see her yelling, steam practically billowing from her ears, Mike trying to stand up for himself and Sloane sitting in bewildered silence. And he definitely didn't see the waitress who worked before Tami, go flying across the room, scaring away most of the customers that Dave's Diner used to

have.

Dave's Diner had never been the same since.

Holding up a finger, Will sent a dazed smile to Tami. She came over quickly, grinning with her perfect white teeth.

"Can I get the... Kiwi-Strawberry?"

*Rumors are like honeybees on flowers. They leave for the Winter and you hope your life can be peaceful for once. But once the Spring comes again, you're swarmed. And you can't find any way out, but the **wrong way**.*

Tami nodded, an impressed hum escaping her lips. "The best smoothie in this joint, if you ask me." She tucks the notepad away in her apron pocket, with a wink. "Even if you ain't. I'll go get that for you."

You'll always be the sweetest girl at Hawkins High. Same as Mark, you aren't an inherently bad person. You let yourself be deceived by a rumor and your views on me changed all the same. You're just a... Sweet little airhead.

Will forces himself not to jump when his smoothie is placed in front of him. He sends Tami a thankful smile, her hand ruffling the already messy bushel of hair on his head. Glancing at the tall serving, Tami seemed to freeze thoughtfully. "Yannow? I think there was someone else who sat here, drinkin' that same flavor smoothie... I completely forgot his name." Will's smile fell, watching a drop of water traveling down the glass.

"Oh, well. Enjoy!"

*Mike stopped coming around after you expressed your **distaste** with our friendship. I can at least say, he still gave me silent nods in the hallway. And congratulations. I hear you two started dating afterward. Are you dating again now? Or are you on another break?*

Will reached forward, taking the straw between his index finger and thumb. He twirled the tool, mindlessly before taking a quick sip. *Neither.* He answered. *They've decided they just don't work.* The drink was insanely sweet. He could see the appeal it had to people like

Sloane and Tami. Swallowing heavily, he lifted his gaze to the person across the table. A different Sloane had returned. A sadder grey-er Sloane. Looking out the window, the time had changed to night, the parking lot empty except for a stray bike. Sloane's. The sky was clear, not a cloud in sight, the moon staring back at him, menacingly. Tools to record a tape were splayed across the table in between the both of them. A leather jacket hung from his shoulders and a wrinkled old Disney tee was tucked into a pair of dark blue khakis.

I still go to Dave's. Consistently-actually, I'm recording this while drinking my favorite smoothie. Kiwi-Strawberry. It's dark out-pretty late-and I think they want to close up but they're avoiding me. Out of pity, I think.

Sloane's hair looked like it hadn't been maintained in a long time, a bit frizzy at the ends. He hadn't cut his hair since the end of Sophomore year, but his hair looked forgotten. There were obvious bags under his eyes and the usual light specks of amber and espresso gone.

His fire was gone. Sloane shut his eyes as he took the last sip from his Smoothie.

This'll be my last smoothie for a very long time. Oh-shit, sorry. Forever, actually. This is my last smoothie, period.

Will looked down at his smoothie in disgust as if drinking it was disrespecting Sloane's memory somehow. It was about a third of the way empty by this point, but his stomach flipped, knowing that Sloane could never have another. Closing his hands around the cup, he leaned until it was on the opposite side. He could feel the lump at the back of his throat building as he met Sloane's gaze.

Friendship. It's a fickle and confusing thing, isn't it? I wonder, Jane. Do you understand it quite yet? Or is it just as confusing for you as it was for me? When you left and let the rumor change the way you saw me. Was constantly-on-the-prowl Sloane easier to swallow than the genuine just-needed-a-friend Sloane you got to know?

And which did you prefer? Sloane sighs with a laugh. I think I'm going to relieve the chef of having to look at me anymore. Friends. Funny how you think you know somebody. Time for the next tape, everyone.

The tape fell silent and the soft hum of the tape continuing to turn filled the headset. Sloane collected his things, placing them into his bag and left the table without a goodbye. Will never got to say goodbye. Will sniffled softly, taking off the headphones. His ears popped and were filled with the sounds of a working Diner. Clattering dishes and the Chef yelling about a burnt burger faded in and out of his attention. He pulled up his sleeve to glare at the small watch on his wrist. 1:20. School ends in about an hour. Pulling the glass back to himself, Will decided *not* finishing it would be more disrespectful to Sloane's spirit. Slouching in the booth, he placed the straw in his mouth.

He took elongated sips, taking a moment to swallow before returning to slurping every last bit into his mouth. Mike slips into the seat across the way, placing a small basket of fries onto the table. Will looked between Mike and the fries and his stomach snarled in response. He hadn't eaten at all, had he? Pulling the straw out of the smoothie, Will placed it to the side, grabbing a french fry and dipping it into the sloppy drink. Across the table, Mike grimaced in disgust.

"Is that good?" Will snatched another fry, shaking his head. "I can't tell." He mumbled, frowning slightly. His mouth was numb to any flavors, the only thought on his mind being 'eat something, stupid'. He'd probably regret this later, but he figured staying hungry was an even dumber idea. Mike shook his head, obviously foreseeing something Will didn't. Watching Will place another dripping french fry into his mouth, Mike cleared his throat.

"So did you?" Will grunted, pushing the empty smoothie glass away. "Did I what?" Mike nodded to the Walkman that was now sitting on the table.

"Walk away?" A clip of Will watching Jane throw the waitress across the diner played behind his eyes as he bit into another french fry. The Diner bell dinged with him letting the door close, turning on his heel and running home. Shaking his head, Will managed a stiff smile.

"No." Mike sighed in relief. That was good enough for Will. Sitting up, he glanced out the window at Jonathan, who was now watching the two, curiously. When his gaze met Will's, he smiled, waving slightly. Will nodded in reply, turning back to the table. Rubbing his palm, he

sighed.

"I think I've had enough for today." Mike nodded in understanding.

"I could only listen to one before getting sick." Will sent him a grimace, Mike shrugging softly. "You know, like *sick sick*."

"Oh. That's disgusting, Mike."

"Listening to my *dead* friend on tape just didn't sit well with me," Will grumbled about Mike not being Sloane's friend anymore, but brushed it off when Mike asked. To say his thoughts had turned petty would be an understatement. The two boys rise from the booth, turning to leave the building. Before stepping out, Will stops to pay for his smoothie. Approaching the bar, he waves Tami over, pulling his wallet out of his pocket. He glances at the price briefly, before sifting through the lightly used wallet for the accurate change.

"Hey, hey, hey. What are you doin'?" Tami questioned, her tone light. Shaking her head, she pushed Will's money away. "Listen, the smoothie's on me. You look like you could use a break."

Will wanted to scoff. He wanted to tell her she had no idea. Instead, he put away his money and pulled out a five instead. Proffering it to her, he smiled. He spoke before she could reject it.

"It's a tip. Thanks for the smoothie, Tami." A bright smile spread across her lips, cheeks warming. Taking the bill, she nodded.

"Thanks, Will. Try to have a nice day, okay?" She called as he exited. Will snorted.

"Sure."

5. cassette 2 - side a

I know that for you all, I'm already dead, but just know I am scared. Was scared? No one knows anything about The Unknown. There's no way to, like, study it or to know what happens after it all. Is it eternal darkness? Is it the land of happiness and eternal peace that the churches preach? Or will I be banished to the depths of Hell for ending my own life instead of waiting patiently like everyone else? Sorry. Force of habit.

Will's two day suspension went by quicker than he wanted. But on the other hand, he didn't want to have to stay in that house any longer if all Hopper was going to grumble about was Will's change in character. No matter how many times Will explained that he wasn't in the fight, Hopper's response was the same. 'I knew that Wheeler kid was prone to trouble. Ever since he punched me in the gut. I could feel it.' He could feel it. Well, Will could feel himself losing his sanity every time Mike called over the Walkie Talkie. First thing in the morning and after breakfast, after lunch, then he'd try to avoid Lucas and Dustin between 2 and 5. God knows why. Then he'd send a quick update of his day after dinner and say goodnight. For Will, it was too drastic of a change for him to get used to, going from not talking at all, to talking every other hour.

Something told Will that Mike did it less for him and more for himself. A coping mechanism for having to go through something like listening to the 13 tapes that a friend had made before killing themselves. Mike didn't take things like loss very well, and to have to hear their voice? Will could only imagine what was going through his mind, if Mike let himself think anymore in the first place.

Joyce was fairly lenient with the suspension, listening to Jonathan's short description of what happened. She wasn't happy with the way Mike handled the situation, but she was happy both boys came out of it with little to no injuries. She didn't openly gush about it, but Will knew she hoped the little bit of interaction meant Will was going to start hanging out with his friends again. With the way the tapes were going, he didn't think he'd get close to them without wanting to scream about something he learned from Sloane's death. He didn't want to distance himself anymore than he already had, but this kind

of thing is unforgivable. And when the time came, would he forgive himself?

Will already hated himself for it.

There was no return. So when Dustin scheduled an AV Room meeting for the first time in two years on the exact day that Mike and Will return to school from their suspension? Will begged Jonathan to tape his mouth shut all morning. The stress made it hard to eat anything and the same sweet smile he received from Jane every morning made his stomach leap into his throat. Wearing the headset around his neck, Will kept the next two cassettes, 2 and 3, hidden in his jacket pockets like always.

Only, he didn't particularly take into consideration how the Party would react to him walking in with the Walkman's headset 'proudly' placed around his neck. It was safe to say Lucas wasn't all that happy.

"You listen to *cassettes* now, Will?" He questioned, thickly, eyes narrowed in what Will thought was suspicion. Will swallowed, nodding stiffly. "Yep. Always have."

After Will's growth spurt, he and Lucas were around the same height, but Will couldn't help but feel small in his presence. Whenever Lucas was angry, whenever something didn't go his way. Will shrunk and he hid, but he never let the fear show.

Lucas Sinclair had been on every sports team at Hawkins High by the time Junior year came around. He was good at it, and the group made agreements to expand on their talents after Middle School. Will joined the Art Club, Mike found comfort in the Chess Club and School Council. Jane joined Choir, Max, the Environmental Awareness Club. And Dustin liked Debate and Performing Arts. Performing Arts was a choice that no one foresaw but Will. Will could foresee a lot of things before they happened. Not all things, though.

Not Sloane's death.

Dustin seemed to be glad *anyone* came in the first place, when he stumbled into the AV Room. His bag thrown haphazardly over his shoulder and his hair thrown up into one of the usual buns he wore

to bed. The hairstyle really made Will realize how much his friend had changed. His hair was so much longer. Wilder, probably a better choice of words. His gaze scanned the faces of the teens standing in the room before his mouth twitched into a hesitant smile. Shutting the door, he ignored the annoyed glances from Max and Lucas, making a beeline to stand by Will. Will frowned at Dustin's hurried, jumpy demeanor, heaving a sigh through his nose.

Dustin was another of his friends who changed, who had not only changed, but went through the most obvious shift. Not that anyone was *normal* anymore. His trucker caps were traded in for scrunchies. He auditioned for every play the school hosted and *killed* the performance, but whenever someone would speak to him outside of character, he'd shrink. His voice small and gaze fidgety. When Will went to ask about it, Dustin brushed it off as Insomnia. Will didn't know anyone with that disorder and he didn't know exactly what it meant. Only that people with it, didn't sleep all that much. Dustin placed his bag on the ground, pulling his sleeves into his palms with a wide smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Okay-" Lucas' posture dipped forward, palms placed firmly against the table. He glared at Dustin.

"Why did you call us all here, Dustin?" Dustin scowled.

"Well, shit, Lucas. That's certainly a way to start the fucking conversation." He mumbles. Lucas eyes Dustin with distaste, the obvious rift between them coming to the surface. It had been building up for a long time. Will supposed Sloane's death made it official. Made the rip become a full tear. Will tried to keep his gaze low, his patience already wearing thin with the whole situation. Mike cleared his throat, from his seat at the table. His leg audibly bounced anxiously underneath the table, hands folded on top of the furniture.

"Dustin," The curly-haired male's attention turned to Mike, the scowl gone from his face. His expression one of genuine curiosity. The past wrinkles that contorted his skin left, leaving his skin smooth. Mike's lips quirked up into a nervous smirk.

"How are you doing?" Jane nods in interest, quirking her head. At this, Will lifted his gaze, watching Dustin's reaction to the question.

Dustin's face flickered through at least ten different emotions within the second that it took for Lucas to get fed up.

"You got to be fucking kidding me!" He throws his arms up in exasperation. Placing his hands on his head, he shuts his eyes. It's obvious that Dustin tries ignoring Lucas, when his eye twitches at the athlete's outburst. But he doesn't move. His gaze stays on Mike. He smiles, weaker than before.

"I'm fine! Yanno? Like, everything could be wor-" He stops, rubbing his wrist, unconsciously. A visible gulp. "-It could be worse." Mike nods, softly, dropping his gaze. Max doesn't seem as angered as she did before, dropping herself into a nearby chair. She slouches, a soft frown darkening the warm air she usually gave off. Shaking her head, she didn't try to hide the glossiness of her eyes.

"It really sucks that it takes all this trouble to get us into the same stupid room." She mumbles thoughtfully. Jane grunts softly, moving to sit as well. Will went to sit, but hesitated giving his watch a quick glance. Nodding, he sat. They had some time. Eventually everyone was sitting, all except for Lucas himself. Lucas paced by the door, clearly pissed. The sight made Will's blood boil. The fact that meeting up with his friends made him so *upset*. It forced Will to resort to wringing his hands. The soothing feeling of his knuckles rolling past each other provided little relief as he watched Lucas' form drift back and forth on the farthest side of the room.

Will wasn't the only one to notice.

Rolling her eyes, Max shifted to glare at her on again off again boyfriend. "Lucas!" She doesn't even get a sideways glance from him. "Jesus, sit down. You look like Wheeler. Pace any longer and there'll be a path in the ground." She complained, crossing her arms. Mike didn't even try to deny the fact that his only outlet to aggravation was excessive pacing. Lucas scoffed, pausing temporarily. "I don't have time for these pointless Emotional Check In's, Max." Will readjusts his jaw, letting the joint shift as he stares at his hands in his lap.

"Unless this meeting has a point, I'm out of here-" Jane pipes up next, her expression hurt. "Friends, Lucas! We're your friends! No meeting

is pointless-

"These meetings *are* pointless! Because-because every time we come in here, everyone says they're fine." His voice cracks audibly, a broken frown on his face. He pauses to look at everyone, his eyes filling with tears. "And we all know it's a goddamn lie! None of use are fine! I'm not fine!" Shaking his head, Lucas gestures to Dustin across the table, the first tear traveling down his cheek.

"Dustin sure as hell isn't fine! We're all *lying* to ourselves!" Lucas stops to breathe. During the silence, no one says anything and it seems to make Lucas angrier. Looking up, Will can see that Jane is chewing violently at her lip to keep from sobbing, rivers of tears already leaving her own eyes. Her sniffles are the only sounds beside the labored breaths of Lucas across the room. To his left, Will can hear Dustin mumbling to himself. A chant or mantra; *It's okay*. The phrase swirled in Will's brain, as his brows softened. His expression was blank but inexplicable. The chant lulls him into a state of cloudiness and confusion, his mind and vision going cloudy. He blinked to see through the clutter of thoughts that blurred his vision and failing.

"Is... Will okay?" Max asks, quietly. Mike scoffs, nodding. "Of course-" A pointed glance from Lucas shuts Mike up before he can go any further with his lie. The paladin drops his gaze, focusing on his folded hands. Will can hear them, even feels a soft tap from Dustin on his shoulder; but he's not sure where he is. Mentally or physically. He takes a breath to remind himself how to breathe, his heart thundering in his chest. But it doesn't help the troubled teens around him.

"Will?"

He takes another breath, his mouth going dry when Sloane makes his presence known. He starts off on the farthest corner, leaning on the wall, watching everything. Will's friends trying to catch his attention, Mike staring at Will so intently it was scary. Then his gaze shifts. He turns to Will. Will thought he could see pity in the ghost's eyes. Before long, Sloane moves to stand by Lucas, arms crossed loosely.

"Will!"

The bell rings, he thinks. Maybe..?

Sloane sends a glance to Lucas, waving a hand in front of the darker boy's face. But Lucas's gaze never moves from Will, concern clear on his tear stained face. Will knows no one else can see Sloane, he didn't need a reminder. Another breath. Was he going crazy?

"Will-seriously. *Dude!* You're freaking us out!" Dustin's voice echoes in, the loudest he's heard him since it happened.

Will wanted to scoff. He was freaking *himself* out. His body felt paralyzed, his eyes drifting in and out of focus, the only control he had over blinking and breathing. Was this what going insane felt like? A loss of grip. A feeling like nothing was ever in your control, that reality was burdened with bars blocking every opening. A feeling of constantly falling into the abyss of nothingness. Of knowing what others think when they see you, knowing how others *felt* when they saw you. Taking the knowledge and bottling it up inside until you explode into a million little pieces. When would Will explode? Had he already *imploded*?

"Will, *please*-" Sloane waves, "Hey. Earth to Will."

Will blinks out of his trance, light drowning his senses. He's thrown back into reality, the world outside the room alive with children talking. The bell never rang. Sloane was never there. And he was still here. In the AV Room. In his mind, time passed in hours, but in reality he hadn't been out more than two minutes. Will takes in a breath, letting his head fall to the cold surface of the table in front of him. Someone mumbles in relief, another lets out a small sob. (Jane most likely) His hands fly to his neck, clutching the headset out of reflex, slow breaths rattling his chest. Lucas tries again to call out to their most troubled friend.

Shaking his head, Will closes his eyes. "I'm not okay."

"I was never okay. I've never *been* okay."

"It's okay, Will. You can get through this-We can," Mike pauses. "We all can..!"

"Is it okay?" He asks before anyone can speak. "Is everyone in here on the tapes?" Will's question drifts out into stale air. Papers shift and

clothes rub against each other. Will doesn't expect an answer, but he thought he trusted the people in that room enough to ask.

"Yes." Dustin spits, impulsively. His voice is hoarse with disgust. "*Dustin!*" Lucas shouts.

"The entire Party is on those stupid tapes. We all did something shitty to a kid who wanted nothing more than to fit in, y'know? *We all* did something shitty." Dustin stops his wild rambling to breath. Turning to Mike, he laughs without humor. Shaking his head, Lucas averted his gaze.

"You don't know that. It could be-" Dustin's gaze snapped to the darker boy, an accusing fire burning in his eyes. "It could be what? A *lie?*" Everyone goes stiff, looking between Dustin and Lucas. Between what they wished was true and the truth. Will looked at Lucas in disbelief before turning back to Dustin. Dustin shakes his head, scoffing softly. Placing a hand on his chest, Dustin's eyes darken.

"Fine. *I* did something shitty. To a *friend*. And the world is fucking falling around me. So no, I'm not okay, either *and* I'm on the tapes."

"Wait, wait," Mike tries, desperation echoing his words. He swallows, opening and closing his hands reflexively. "Don't-we can-" Lucas shakes his head.

"*Don't-Wait-We can-*" He mocks, at a higher octave. "No, Mike, we can't do *shit!* There's no *waiting*, there's no *hope*. Everyone in school might as well have been standing in that room when he did it-" Will's head shoots up, nausea filling the pit of his gut. His stomach growls softly, the organ turning over. Mike shudders at the picture, his eyes glazing over.

"At least, I'm *trying!*" No cause of death was ever shared with the public, Will recalled. The only information that they had was that it was suicide. There were so *many* ways to go out. Will searches the room for a trash bin, his hand flying to his stomach.

"Stop it!" Jane called, hands gripping her shoulders. "Please..." Max reaches out to Dustin as the boy flies into chanting another mantra. He's stiff, like a statue, eyes shut, his chest rising and falling with

each slow breath. His fingers scratch at his forearm through his sweater. He chants quietly, the phrase different, indecipherable, this time. Will dipped his head. Lucas shakes his head, gesturing to Mike.

"All you're trying to do is pretend this never happened! Nothing will *ever* be the same, Mike." Will's stomach lurches. *Where the hell was the trash bin?*

"Lucas, please!" Jane tries again, flinching when Mike gets up. Mike's hands fly to the air around his head. He goes into pacing like he usually does.

"I would never do that to Sloane! You can't just-*Forget him!* You can't pretend he never existed!" An acidic burp leave Will's mouth. *Oh, god.*

"Oh, wise shit coming from the likes of *you.*"

"It wasn't—"

Will spins to the floor by his chair and retches, the small breakfast he had leaving his body. Max exclaims at the sound. So many screeches of chairs moving. A flash of Sloane killing himself in another, revolting way flashes behind Will's eyes and his stomach closes in on itself. His body lurches with another gag, but nothing else can leave his body. There's nothing left, so water escapes his mouth, dribbling messily down his chin.

The bell rings, but no one moves.

Shaking his head, Will sobs. It felt like there were at least 20 hands on his back after that, rubbing consolingly. No one seemed to be phased by the smell, making Will feel better. The boy who used to work 24/7 to make *them* feel better. Thankfully, someone in the hall heard Will and the shout that came from Max, because within minutes, the janitor and the nurse were in the room clad in face masks and medical gloves. Will had his money bet on the school's Nosy Nancy; James Young. The janitor gets to work covering up the crime scene as the group of kids are dragged to the Nurse's office.

"Here again, I see, Mr. Wheeler."

"Hey, Mrs. P..."

"Hmph."

The Nurse writes the group out of school in fear of a contamination. She diagnosed Will's stomach trouble as the stomach bug and was 100 percent sure with how close the others' were to the mess, that they all were at risk of the sickness. She makes sure to send a stern phone call to each kid's parents, leaving a message, when no one answered.

Will wouldn't have a normal school week for as long as he had those tapes, would he?

Waiting for their parents to pick them up, The Juniors found themselves out in the courtyard, sitting in a circle in the grass. Lucas had already apologized ten different times for making Will sick. For making everyone upset. He tried to find an excuse for the way he was acting, but everyone already knew. Sloane's Suicide Tape Insanity threw each of them over the literal edge of insanity. It wasn't just Will anymore. It was all of them. They always ended up connected by *something*. The Upside Down, Troy and his stupid friends. Maybe it was the Destiny that kept them connected. Because Will wouldn't believe that Sloane's suicide was *fate*. At such a young age, with so much going on for him outside of the horrible crap. Will wouldn't let fate be the case.

A breeze blows by, shifting both Jane's and Max's hair. They didn't try to keep their hair under control, gazes stuck on the grass underneath them. A clutter of flowers sits in the distance and Will wishes he had any desire to draw for pleasure. To capture and keep the purest thing he'd been in contact with in a month. Sloane plucks one of the flowers, staring down at it. Will's hand moves to the headset around his neck, a sigh leaving his system as another gust of wind blows by. Lucas frowns, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Damn-This weather is heinous." Shaking his head, he glares up into the sky. "The one day I sit outside." If the Party still hung out like they used to, they'd go for a hike after school. They always hiked on Mondays. Rolling her eyes, Max smirks stiffly. "Wear a coat. I hear they help for these kinds of situations."

"Oh, bite me."

Soft laughter lilt from Jane and Mike, a choice few smiling at the sound. It was weird to hear after all that happened that morning. It echoed of halfway-happy's and almost okay's. Hope that didn't fix anything but would hopefully help them move forward past this time of depression. Dustin turns to the smaller boy beside him, placing a careful hand on Will's knee. Will meets his gaze, receiving a stiff nod.

"They won't listen to themselves." Will glances around the circle, each teen giving him some sign of encouragement.

All except Lucas.

Pulling out the tape with the number 2 on it, Will looked over the exterior. The dizziness of nausea pokes at the back of his head, as he plucks the Walkman out of his back pocket. He kind of wished they could listen to themselves so he wouldn't have to. With a sigh, he places the tape inside, Side A up. He pulls the headset onto his ears. Closing the little door, he sends a final glance to each of his friends before pressing play.

Welcome back, chitlins! Sloan pauses. *Could you hear my demons calling out through that bogus attempt at being happy? My heart screaming, my mind running at a constant 90 miles per hour?* He goes quiet, as if to give time for an answer. *No?*

That's too bad. I could.

*Sorry if I'm kinda... **Kickin'** today.* Sloane heaves a tired sigh. *I don't know about you all but my voice would be shot doing these all in one night and I didn't sleep like, at all, last night so... Spare me the bunk.*

Will's face smooths out, a soft look of curiosity replacing his previous frown.

So. You've made it to cassette tape 2. An accomplishment for those listening, I'm sure. I've got a Scottish metaphor that just might work for this tape. Sloane clears his throat.

Many a puckle makes a muckle. Do any of you know what that means?

Will dipped his head, as his fingertips brushed against the smooth grass. He grabbed the bright green blades between his fingers, pulling

absently. Many a puckle. He was sure he'd heard the phrase before somewhere, but he'd never known anyone who was Scottish and he was very sure Sloane was part Dutch, not Scottish. The gazes of a couple of his friends burned against his skin as Sloane's voice continued.

It's alright if you don't. These tapes are more than just a way for me to explain everything. It's a learning experience. For us both. Many a puckle makes a muckle can work for a lot of instances in your life where things got so fucking heavy that your resolve just breaks. Where you give up fighting.

A lot of littles can make a big thing. Think of it as... The snowball effect.

Will blinked, a conversation that he and Sloane had shared pushing it's way to the forefront. The only reason Will had paid no attention to the short exchange of words was because he didn't understand what it meant at the time. It was a while after Will had stopped avoiding Sloane, for the umpteenth time. After that summer when Sloane decided to stop getting haircuts and swapped in his usual style for leather jackets and dark khakis. It was the first day of art class after Summer Break and Sloane was a completely different person. The usual smiles he wore were replaced with blank stares.

The short conversation between Will and Sloane played behind Will's eyes, the two of them sitting in their chosen seats at the back of the Art Classroom. Sloane had just had a Dutch outburst, cursing the boy who walked by and kicked his easel. By accident of course but Sloane seemed so stressed that any little thing would shove him over the edge. And that rubbed Will the wrong way. In a way, he was worried, but he never truly let what Sloane said make a mark.

"Sloane?" Nodding, Sloane grunted to make it known that he was listening. Will swallowed. "Are you okay?" Sloane smiled at the question, dropping his hands from the painting. Shrugging softly, he turned to the only friend he had left.

"I guess... The snowball's gotten a bit too big for me... Y'know?"

You probably think... I'm making a big thing out of nothing. The name calling died down and so what if one of your friends ditched you because they believed your only intention was to steal their on and off Eggo-replacer. Those were two small things. And the reasons coming up are slightly bigger small things.

Little. Things. Matter. Eventually every choice you make leads to an outcome, whether you planned it or not. Good or bad. Useful or useless. It all started with your choice. I wonder if our next friend thought that he'd end up on here. I wonder if his choice effected him as negatively as it effected me. Well, why don't you ask him?

Mike? Do you regret your choice?

Will's fingers brushed along the buttons pressing the pause. He takes a small breath before turning to Mike. Will dips forward to lean his elbows on his knees, Walkman clutched between his hands. Will's gaze was intense, burning. He wasn't sure if he was strong enough to ask the question. If he was supposed to, as Mike's friend. But why wouldn't Mike tell Will that he was friends with Sloane in the first place?

"Do you?" His voice came out harder than he intended and Mike's form stiffened. Jane sends him a soft glare, but Will ignores it, waiting for Mike to say something. There was always a right answer. Mike stays quiet, watching his hands before turning to Will. He stares in silence, his jaw hardened.

"Yes."

Now that we know who made the choice, it's time to figure out what choice he made. There's a lot of choices you can make at our age in the this town. Work for your family's company or go to college in a big city. Start driving lessons, or spend the rest of your days on a bus. Not that Hawkins has a bus system. Whether to keep making steps forward or lay down and give up.

Mike's choice was a little more complicated. Or at least, I hope it was. Remember how I told you all, that after the ordeal with Jane, he

continued to give me polite nods in the halls? Don't worry, it wasn't a lie; he did. But, one day, he replaced the kind nod, with a rough pull.

Into an empty classroom after hours.

To you, it was just a conversation, but to me, it was a lot more. It was an argument with you, a fight with myself, and the death of a friendship I thought—no, hoped wouldn't collapse. But you couldn't do it anymore. Being 'friends' with me was just... Too much pressure.

Rumors were that you were a fighter with a determination lvl of 99. But my friendship wasn't worth fighting for.

A soft call for breakfast echoes in the background of the tape. Sloane snorts. *Just a moment.* A soft click. As Will waits for Sloane to return, he embraces the countless stares he felt along his skin. A chill runs down his back and he sighs. He almost regrets lifting his head as each pair of eyes around him stuck to him like glue. Even meeting their gazes didn't lessen the blatant stares he was receiving. They were looking for something. Anything. Some kind of reaction to the information Sloane was giving him. They expected him to cry, to be sick. *Again.* But Will didn't think he had the energy to even frown. And was he really surprised that all of his friends, including himself, were on these tapes? As time went on, he realized them not being on the tapes would be more surprising.

He scoffs through his nose, and a honk echoes from the lot a couple feet away. Looking up, Will can see Jonathan walking over the hill. Stopping at the top, the teen is haloed with sunlight, his hair bright under the light. He waves down at the group, one hand hidden in his jean's pocket. Jonathan was Will's guardian angel. Everyone in the grass was sure of it at that moment. Lucas's gaze halted just a second too long on Jonathan though, an untraceable emotion taking his face. Will stops the recording, climbing to his feet. He halts, looking over the faces of his friends again. Debating. Swallowing, he turns to Dustin.

"Bye, Dustin." Dustin nods, softly. "Later, Will," Looking over the group again, Will stops on Mike. If Will was on any other tape, *maybe.* Clearing his throat, he turns to leave, keeping his gaze on the grass as he wandered up the hill. Jonathan cups his hand on Will's

shoulder, leading him to the car.

"Reconciliation of The Party?" He questions. Will combs his bangs back only for them to fall back in line.

"I dunno,"

A soft click echoes out of the headset, Will lying curled up on his bed. It was way past even his weekend bedtime, but he had to finish the tape. It wouldn't be fair if he didn't. He would feel *right*, if he didn't. In the distance, the Walkie Talkie crackles with another tired last-ditch attempt from Mike for communication. *Come on, Will... You can't-Please don't ignore me.* Will rolled over, turning his back to the device.

Sorry. Have to choke down something, don't I?

Will swallows.

*Exactly. Now, where was I? Shuffling of papers. Mike. Mike, Mike... We were friends at **one point**... Right?*

For a moment, Sloane's voice sounded unsure. As broken as he was supposed to sound, just days before death. A direct difference from the persona he used for every cassette leading up to that moment. Clearing his throat, he continues. *What am I kidding, of course not. Excuse me, I have to sort out my thoughts.*

Uh, the argument... It wasn't violent. He wasn't mad, I don't think. He just hated the rumors. And giving me kind nods in the hall was much too intimate for Hawkins teens to handle. After all, I almost snatched him away from Jane Eleanor Hopper.

Who did I think I was?

Hopefully, not a person deserving of a friend.

Will exhaled in relief. He could honestly say, he hadn't witnessed this one. He had his bi-monthly Linner with Hopper that night and he's never been late to those, no matter how much he hated them. It was mostly to catch up on life after two months and, as Joyce liked to say, bond as men. *Bond as men.*

Jeez.

Sloane is quiet on the other side of the headset. Will can't tell if it's thoughtful silence. Hurt silence. Or the sarcastic silence from the last tape. When his voice comes back at a whisper, Will is almost confused by the words that come out of his mouth.

Mike? What the fuck, dude?

Sh! We don't need anymore rumors spreading than there already is.

Oh. Sloane was reenacting the argument. Will frowned, tightening his grip on his pillow. Sloane could remember details like that?

Oh... That's why we're talking.

What's that supposed to mean?

Don't play stupid. It's not a good look on you.

I really don't have time for this, Sloane.

*So, now I'm **Sloane**.*

You've always been Sloane! Always! What are you trying to say?

Will shook his head. Sloane was Slo. Ramen Noodle. Any of the stupid nicknames. But never Sloane.

What do you want, Mike?

We need to talk.

And we are.

Seriously. Like seriously talk.

And again. Were we not already? This obviously isn't for fun.

Why are you being so pissy?

It's been a long day. I want to go home. Sloane's tone changes from resolute and sarcastic to forlorn with the snap of a finger. Will shakes

his head, shutting his eyes, trying to imagine the two in a classroom whispering obnoxiously. The school's empty except for a few teachers prepping their next lessons and staff in the office. The classroom they're in is bedazzled in oranges and reds as the sun goes down just outside the building. Will was pretty sure it was Fall. He couldn't be sure. Eventually a fuzzy picture of Mike shifting nervously by the wall paints itself behind Will's lids.

Sloane is leaning on a desk, arms crossed over his chest. His gaze is low as he stares at his scuffed sneakers. Scuffed from trying to run away in gym. Will only knew that because of something he overheard from Mark. Sloane's hair is still short as it's still the beginning of Sophomore year.

Mike shakes his head. "Sorry, I'm sorry. This'll be quick. I promise." Sloane doesn't answer. He only nods.

"We can't be friends anymore." Sloane scoffs, solemnly, a disappointed smile on his face. "I thought we already made that clear. We don't hang out anymore."

"We have to act like we don't know each other. Like we *never* knew each other." Sloane's quiet, listening in disbelief.

"You have to act like our friendship never happened. Whatever we had *never existed*." Sloane shakes his head, standing from the desk. "What?"

"Listen, it's for the best!" Sloane's eyes widen, incredulously. Mike nods, gesturing out of the classroom.

"The rumors will stop and everything will go back to normal. We won't have to deal with it anymore!" Sloane scoffs, dropping his arms.

"And this is supposed to be *easy*?"

"Yes! Well, maybe not, but if we *try*-"

"You're mental! You've lost it!" Sloane suddenly shouts. He'd already lost Jane two weeks before and he still hadn't gotten over the ordeal. And now he was going to lose Mike. Who he thought was one who'd stay and fight despite everything. Sadly, not even Mike Wheeler was

strong enough to stand against the tides of High School.

"Sloane, *please..!*" Sloane cuts his spasm short, huffing an angry breath out of his nose. Mike sighs, dipping his head. "This won't be easy for me, either—"

"Then why are we doing it?!"

"Because! *I* still have a reputation to *try* and keep!" Sloane freezes, his eyes wide as saucers. Mike halts, taking in what he had just said. His eyebrows turn up apologetically and he reaches out to explain himself.

"Dude, listen - I didn't—" Sloane steps away, eyes already brimming with tears. "Slo! Look - you know I would *never*—"

"But you just did." Mike shakes his head. "*I'm sorry,*"

Sloane nods, fixing his bag onto his shoulders. "So am I. I didn't mean to drag you down with me." Sloane moves to leave the classroom, stopping when Mike tries to speak again.

"Maybe... Maybe if you weren't—"

"Goodbye, Mike." He leaves the classroom, Mike dragging shaking palms through his hair. Will blinks, gasping out of the scene. His vision stays blurry, blocked by tears that wouldn't fall. This once, sobs didn't build up in his chest. The pain is only displayed by the trembling frown on his lips. Thankfully, Jane went home with Hopper earlier that night. Across the room, sitting on the floor by the wall was Sloane. Or what Will could make out of him. His head was down, knees pulled up to his chest, wearing the same red sweater.

"I'm sorry," Will mumbled, acknowledging the ghost for the first time. He rubs at his tears, Sloane clearing until Will could make him out. Staring back at him. "Me too." Is the soft reply that echoes off the walls from no real direction.

Maybe if I were a different person, this wouldn't have happened. Maybe if I hadn't let Mark take me out after school that day, we'd still be friends. Maybe I'd still be around.

Maybe. Another strange word.

Time for Side B.

6. intermission 1

(Slyly misplaced intermission published as the next chapter? Yes, sir. Sorry about the updates. I'm working on a Web Series and it's taxing. I've already had to put two other stories on hiatus. This is the only one I can get inspiration for while working on the script, so I'll do my best to balance both.)

"Dustin's a weird kid." Will scowls, Sloane backtracking. "In a good way! I mean it in a good," He shrugs, stepping over a stone. "Entirely wholesome way." Will rolls his eyes, switching his sketchbook from one hand to the other.

"Sure."

It's the summer after Freshman year. Any drama has since died off and the town is quiet aside from the usual from Merrill and Eugene. Wednesdays are probably the only days where Will isn't busy with Party duties and can manage to hang out with his only friend outside of the Party. It wasn't his choice but more of an unfortunate circumstance that he had to deal with. He didn't have high scores to practice beating, nor did he have DnD Campaigns to write. So he was left to his own devices on Wednesdays and fortunately, Sloane was always free. He never had any plans and most days he spent his time sitting out on his lawn and 'daydreaming'. Some Wednesdays, they'd do exactly that. Lay out on the lawn for an hour or two (or until Joyce grew uneasy with Will being so far from home without Mike), other Wednesdays, they'd go for walks and talk about whatever came up.

Sloane slides his hands into his pockets, glancing at Will. "He's definitely good at theater." Nodding, Will grins. "Right? I tell him, but he doesn't believe me."

"You ever wonder what it's like?" Will frowns. "What what's like?"

"What what?" Sloane teases, laughing. He turns back to the sidewalk, noting a crack in the cement. "Performing. Being on stage. I think about it sometimes." Shaking his head, Will gestures with his hand.

"Oh, no. Never." Sloane grins, Will grimacing. "I can't! Being on a stage?!" Absolutely not." They turn a corner, Sloane heaving a sigh. A bird flies overhead, two other birds trailing behind it.

"I suppose you're right. I can watch you hug the floor without a stage—" Sloane stumbles, Will shoving his shoulder. "That's not funny." Sloane purses his lips, watching Will. Will points at Sloane's face using the rings of his sketchbook. His cheeks are inflamed, like being freshly slapped.

"It's not." Sloane shakes his head.

"No?"

"No." After walking around the entire block countless times, Sloane and Will make it back to his front lawn. Standing at the front door are Sloane's mother and Mrs. Byers. They smile and laugh, involved in a clearly very relateable 'mom conversation'. With a glance at the sky, Will and Sloane are reminded of time and how late it was, the sun dipping behind the horizon and orange strewn across the sky. Sloane leads the way up the walkway, their entrance bringing an abrupt end to the mothers' catching up. It's time for Will to go home. Turning to Will, Sloane places a hand on his head.

"Later, Billiam." Will scoffs with disgust, brushing Sloane's hand off. "Billiam? They get worse and worse." He combs his fingers through his bowl cut to situate the hairs, Joyce laughing softly.

"Nicknames are fun! What do people call you, Sloane?" Joyce questions, placing a hand around Will's shoulders. Will grimaces, knowing exactly where the conversation would go. The corny joke that Sloane thought was hilarious but made everyone else uncomfortable. Even Sloane's mother sends him a wary glance, shifting in the doorway.

Sloane straightens his posture, linking his hands behind his back. "Well, actually people call me Slo(w)." Joyce's smile falls and Will clears his throat to hide his laughter. Mrs. Thomas' nervous laughter breaks the dams for the two boys, laughter filling the air around them. Will turns to look at Sloane, Sloane tapping Will's jaw with his knuckle, affectionately.

Will awakes in a mattress soaked with sweat, his mind running circles

in his skull. His breaths leave him in messy exhales and for a moment, he's unsure where he is. The sheets hiding him from the taint of the outside world gain a pound when he rolls over to check the time. 30 minutes to Noon. He shifts to lie on his back, staring at a ceiling that looks so foreign to him. The nightmares were coming back. Memories that he didn't want to remember. Painfully positive memories that shoved their way to the forefront when his mind was left unguarded in his sleep. He hoped that with the false peace he had before the tapes, that they would never come back, but like he was with many other things, he's wrong.

He knows that by this time, his mother would be at work and Hopper, at the Station. With no humming in his room, he knows Jane is gone for the day and that, in itself, made him more uneasy. He couldn't be alone. Not really.

Sitting up, his ears pop and the sounds of birds outside his window fill the empty air. A soft sound that he really appreciated and soon regretted. Sloane loved birds. The carpet feels like rough dirt under his feet when he crosses the room to shut the windows. A crackle at the far side of his room; Lucas looking for Dustin. Max and Mike admit to not knowing where he is before Dustin's voice chimes in at a harsh whisper,

"I'm working."

"Oh. Oh, right. Sorry."

Right. Will almost forgot Dustin had a job. It was lenient when it came to shifts, from what Will could tell. The money wasn't too bad either at a constant 3.40 per hour, give or take a couple of cents. Dustin took shifts whenever he could and during the weekends. Holidays, breaks. It was a way to preoccupy himself. And a distraction, Will figured. Stepping out into the hall, Will wonders if he'd find a distraction, if only for that day. As Will takes a step towards the bathroom, the floor creaks. Shuffling downstairs.

"Will?" It's Jonathan. "You up, buddy?" Turning to the stairwell, Will swallows.

"Yeah." A sigh from Jonathan of what sounds like relief. "Okay. Come

down - when you're ready. Hopper called." Will sighs.

A shift at the Station. Hopper warned Will, if he ended up sent home by the school again, no matter the reason, he'd put him to work. But Will doesn't see Jane put to work when she's sent home from being dress coded. Working at the Station wasn't hard. It wasn't dull, either. He had free access to the coffee machine, Flo let him eat the donuts Hopper wasn't allowed to eat, and when the files got light, Callahan would come in and 'help him finish'. Which usually entailed stuffing the rest where he found it and getting his ten dollars from Hopper. It was tedious. He hated being treated like he did something wrong. Like some kind of troublemaker.

It took Will around an hour to get ready, throwing on whatever clothes he could find after his shower. The quiet of the house beside the hushed whispering of the television downstairs sent chills down his spine. He almost wished the Sloane that haunted him would come back and complain about anything. Any noise was better than white noise. When he leaves his room, clad in lightly dusted Chuck Taylor's, a different whisper enters his ears. A phone call, hushed and almost hurried. From the top of the stairs, Will couldn't make out any words besides, 'don't'... 'sure'... And 'medicine'.

Will takes his time creeping down the stairs, making it just in time to hear Jonathan say goodbye to whoever's on the other side of the line. Chet whines from under the coffee table, his go-to hiding spot, stepping out. Will adjusts his layers of clothes.

Jonathan smiles, grabbing his sweater by the front door. "Hey, Will." Will nods. Once they're outside, Will clears his throat, glancing at his older brother.

"Who were you talking to?" Jonathan meets Will's gaze, clicking a button on his keys. The car beeps in the distance. "You mean - Just now?" Will nods and Jonathan grunts. They climb into the old BMW, Jonathan's mouth twitching up into his signature nervous grin.

"Nancy's sick. I didn't want to - worry you or anything." The car rumbles to a start around them, Will furrowing his brows. "Is she okay?" Jonathan nods, backing out of their 'driveway' and up the back road.

"She... Hates the medicine, but other than that." He shrugs. "Should be fine." Nature passes by in a blur, the sky a big blue pool above them. Will's stress melts away, the farther he gets from the Byers's household and the tapes. A kind of euphoria. Or a false sense of peace. Just a day away from them, a quick break, and then he'll go back to carrying them around everywhere he walked like an oxygen tank. Listening to them all so quickly and all at once would be a snort to the face of Will's mental health and whatever sanity he had left. The tapes only made him wish he hadn't spent so much time running away and more time telling Sloane that there would always be a sea of hecklers wherever he went. What mattered was whether or not he listened to the rot they'd spit at him. But it was no use saying any of this. As Sloane said, it was too little, too late.

For as long as he could remember, Will always wished for a lot of things. Not big things, like a new console or the new ET VHS, but little things like a new pack of color pencils. He'd spend hours planning what he wanted like a young child on the first day of Christmas. Tennis shoes, a new Superman Comic, perhaps a pair of socks. Or the chance to say goodbye. But this wasn't Christmas. And Will wouldn't be getting any of his wishes this year.

The engine quiets down as Jonathan stops outside the Police Station. Will sends the small building a sideways glance, frowning softly. His frown deepens when he spots Jane step out of the building, hand-in-hand with Mark. She waves goodbye to someone in the building, the glass door swinging shut. Jonathan watches quietly as her piercing brown eyes land on the BMW, curious at first. And then she smiles. Will shrinks into his seat, the window rolling down with him. Mark never looks at Will directly, his eyes looking at everything around the car and Jonathan, but never Will. Will figured after what happened, Jane had a talk with him. Not to bother Will or some crap like that.

"Hi, Will. Hi, Jonathan." Her voice chirps. Will smiles, shakily. "Hey." Jonathan grins, nodding softly. Jane's hand grips the window of the passenger side, her smile just as sickeningly sweet as any other day. She turns to Will.

"Hopper says you can hang out with me today if you want. It will count as work." It was an innocent enough request. For Will to hang out with her for at least an hour. Will would have considered it if it

weren't for the jock gripping her hand like a lifeline. Jane's smile falters when Will's eyes flicker to the boy standing behind her. She nods, pulling her hand out of the car. "I forgot," she mumbles. Shaking his head, Will climbs out of the car, Jane and Mark taking a step out of the way.

"Maybe, maybe next time." Mark and Will's gazes meet at that moment, Will scowling softly. He stuffs his hands into his jeans' pockets, stepping around them and to the building, without even a glance back. A bell above him twinkles softly, his aggravation melting away as the smell of doughnuts and fresh coffee fills his nostrils. The sound of officers Callahan and Powell conversing in the main office drifts out into the hall. They laugh over God knows what, but all Will can focus on is the new bell on the door. Or the bell that he strongly believed was new because it couldn't have always been there. Flo steps out of the main office, her frown building into a grin at the sight of the teen. Will returns the smile with a shaky one of his own, allowing himself to be pulled into a hug.

It's getting warmer out, so women like Flo would wear an extra beaded necklace. Maybe a skirt or their best dress. Flo had on a floral skirt that swayed on the wind as she pulled him into the main office. Hopper stands by the coffee machine raising his mug in greeting.

"Hey, buddy."

"Hey, Hopper."

Will makes his way over to the doughnut box, grabbing the last plain. He turns, mirroring Hopper's posture on the counter. Once Flo is sure that Will is comfortable, she returns to her desk, typing away on her typewriter. Callahan gestures to Will, smiling playfully.

"You'd rather work than hang out with Jane?" Swallowing his first bite of the doughnut, Will dips his chin. He pulls on a thin smile. "When was the last time I hung out with you guys?" Powell raises his mug, laughing triumphantly.

"Now that's a point of view. I missed you, kid." Will nods, laughing softly. Hopper makes a sound of remembrance, standing up from the counter. The ceramic of his mug clunks against the hardwood as he

puts it down. He maneuvers towards the door, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "You're gonna like this," he says, placing a careful hand on Will's shoulder when Will shifted out of his way. He squints, looking for something down the hall. Will watches, polishing off the rest of his doughnut.

"Hey! Kid, you in there?" Will's throat closes. Hopper's face brightens, waving for them to come closer. Swallowing gravely, Will hopes they refuse and go back into the room. The room that he hopes isn't the File Storage. Glancing at the bell over the front door, he weighs his chances of finding Jane still waiting outside. After the night he had, he couldn't be stuck in the back room for hours with someone from the party. Someone from anywhere. Despite how dark his thoughts got when he was alone, that was all Will wanted.

Hopper rolls his wrist, nodding slowly. His sign for saying 'pick up the pace'. Will knew it too well. "Yeah, come on." His hand disappears around the corner, grabbing their shoulder, most likely. When his arm returns, it's clutching the shoulders of another party member; Dustin. Will wills himself to blink, keeping his gaze level. Dustin looks about as surprised if not more surprised than he, pulling the sleeves of his shirt into his palms. Will exhales in disbelief. Dustin's well-paying mystery job was at the police station.

Hopper pats Dustin's shoulder, proudly. "He's the other kid who works here. The one I told you about, you remember?" Will nods. He did remember Hopper gushing about a kid who did a great job of filing the cabinets. Something Will realized was only something they did after Will and Callahan speed-filed the rest of the cabinet. He pictured someone meticulous. Someone like Lucas or even Mike. Dustin was not someone at the top of his list. He wasn't sure he even was on the list. Will opens his mouth to speak, but words elude him. Smiles turn into confused glances when the silence drags on for longer than anyone deemed normal. Dustin catches on quickly, closing the space between himself and Will. A smile bedazzles his face, brightening his cheeks, but never creasing his eyes.

"I guess we're working together today, huh?" Hopper's smile returns when Will pulls on a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah, guess so." Gesturing to the duo, Hopper places his hands on his hips.

"See? What did I tell you guys?" Callahan and Powell comment in agreement, Dustin turning his smile to Hopper. "We'll just - go file now."

"Oh. Right, sure."

Hopper steps to the side as Dustin leads the way down the hall and into the File Storage. Will shuts the door behind them, taking a shaky breath to calm himself. The File Storage is a small 4x4 closet filled floor to ceiling with at least 20 silver filing cabinets each cabinet filled with numerous complaints from Merrill, Eugene, or concerned parents. The drawer for 1983 was the one Will never touched. He knows if he does, older nightmares may fill his troubled nights and with what's going on with the tapes, he can't spare any more brain power.

Dustin is crouched on the floor, the drawer for 1985 pulled open and the files littering the carpet around him. He lifts a folder into his hands, glances at the name on the tab and places it into the drawer. Will stands in silence as he grabs another, notes the name, and places it in. Besides the piles of folders is a sheet of paper, a chart listing every file in that drawer. Will knows he should find some other way to spend his time, help with the load, but he can't help but watch Dustin's organized system. Almost too organized.

Will pulls his jacket off his shoulders, dropping it by the door and joining Dustin on the floor. He sits with his legs folded underneath him, taking a folder and glancing at the tab as he watched Dustin do. Byers, Joyce. Will checks it off on the clipboard and passes it to Dustin, the geek muttering a soft thank you in reply. They continue like this for a while, in a silence that wasn't too uncomfortable to sit in but was a bit too quiet for two boys who had been friends since the third grade. Placing another folder into the drawer, Dustin clears his throat.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you where I worked," he says, thoughtfully, "with Hopper. I didn't think you'd, like, care." Will passes off another folder, the pile of files between them dispersing quickly. A soft smile lifts Will's cheeks when he meets Dustin's gaze. "It's whatever, y'know. I'm sorry I make a mess of the files all the time." Dustin smiles, a subtle spark in his eyes. A soft laugh escapes him as he checks off the

final file.

"You and Callahan, you wastoids. A file from the thirties ended up in the seventies!" Will's smile widens. "Honest mistake?" Dustin shuts Drawer 1985, hanging the clipboard on the outside. Nodding, he narrows his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Will follows Dustin to the cabinet for the seventies, his hands stuffed in his pockets. The air is a lot more comfortable after talking to Dustin. After laughing over something as stupid and minuscule as a misplaced file. Dustin checks each clipboard starting from the bottom, mumbling under his breath. He sends a glance over his shoulder to Will, a nervous smile on his lips. "I've already filed a lot of them, so there's not much left. Sorry." Will shakes his head.

"No problem. I get lost in the files sometimes, too," he replies. Dustin checks clipboard 1975, the middlemost drawer. Will's only a couple inches taller than Dustin, his CCD making it hard to get much taller than 5'6. Dustin reaches up to grab clipboard 1976, grunting quietly. Will's mouth runs dry when Dustin's sleeve rolls back revealing splotched burns varying in color. He wants to believe they're drawn on, or accidental from standing too close to a stove or getting splashed with oil but their sizes, square and overlapped look deliberate. Even after Dustin pulls the clipboard down and readjusts his sleeves, Will can see them; burning through the sleeves, flickering behind his lids every time he blinks. When Dustin announces that he hasn't filed that one and reaches up again to open the drawer, Will stares, ingrainning their placement into his mind.

Was he going to lose Dustin too?

Dustin turns with a pile of half the files and catches Will staring. Dustin puts down the files quickly, pulling his sleeves into his palms and crossing the room to grab the stool. Will takes a short breath, gesturing to Dustin's arms.

"Those burns-" Dustin shakes his head, snorting softly. But he doesn't look at Will. He pushes the stool, the wood making a loud thump against the metal of the cabinets. Climbing up, this new height makes

it impossible for his sleeves to ride down.

"It's nothing. I can't cook worth shit." Will purses his lips, his brain going numb as Dustin places the rest of the files on the floor. Will moves slowly, crouching to his knees and sorting the files. Grab, tab, pass it off. The air grows thick with Dustin's anxiety and Will's fear, almost too thick to breathe, but neither speaks. Could someone kill themselves with burns, Will wondered as he passed off another file. He imagines intentionally burning himself, his skin bubbling and growing sickly discolored; but the false image itself is too much and he shakes away the thought, passing off another file. The desire could certainly get worse, Dustin looking for something stronger. Then maybe. Dustin isn't oblivious to Will's clear attempts to avoid looking at him.

Dustin sighs. "Will, it's nothing!" Will nods, checking off a file. "I know. You said so," he says, his voice quiet in the air. Dustin takes the file and places it in the drawer, chewing at his cheek. Will grabs two files, checking them off before looking up at Dustin.

"But I want to be sure," Dustin huffs. He reaches out for the files, but Will keeps them placed in his lap, waiting for Dustin to look at him. Dustin meets Will's gaze when he realizes being stubborn wouldn't work anymore. Will nods.

"Look me in the eye and tell me it's nothing."

"Will-" Will shakes his head. "If it's nothing, you can tell me, can't you..?" Dustin frowns.

"Will, that's not how that works." Will nods, his eyes glistening. He doesn't speak above a whisper but to Dustin, everything he says has an echo. "Yes, it is. If you burned yourself from cooking you can laugh it off. You can tell me, looking in my eyes and say it's nothing." Dustin turns back to the file drawer, raking hair out of his face. He takes a breath, building himself up to say it was nothing, but instead, he sighs. A chill runs down his spine and he frowns. Pulling his sleeves into his palms, he turns so Will is clear in his peripheral.

"I can't," he mumbles, "tell you it's nothing because it's not." Will looks down at the files on his lap, dragging his hands through his

hair. Dustin looks down at Will, taking a deep breath.

"You can't tell anyone-" Will's head snaps up, a tear trailing his cheek. "Why not..?!"

"Because, Will!" Dustin climbs down from the stool. "Because no one cares until the worst happens." Will's frown deepens. "Are you-" Dustin shakes his head.

"No! Of course not, I wouldn't," He sighs, rubbing the hidden part his forehead under his hair. "I don't want to die, Will. It won't get that bad."

"I know you have a lot on your plate already with Sloane and, and Mike being a fucking narbo, so this is what I do." Will stands to his feet, albeit shakily, and searches Dustin's face. The resting calm it's been conditioned into after everything that's happened. The sadness that he hides in the blue of his eyes until he's alone in the File Storage or at home in his room. Dustin doesn't think it'll get worse, but a small dip in Will's stomach tells him he can't take this information for granted. He can't let Dustin go through this on his own because eventually, 'it won't get that bad' will turn into 'maybe just a little more'. And from there it'll be too late.

Will shakes his head. "I don't care how busy I am, you feel like you need to talk, you talk to me." Dustin sighs, looking down. "I mean it, Dustin..! I'll make time!" Dustin turns to get back to work, the soft chatter of the adults down the hall peaking with Callahan's laughter before settling back down into a soft murmur through the door. Dustin lifts the two listed folders into his arms, climbing onto his stool and placing them in the drawer.

"I'll be okay," Will frowns. "Maybe. But I don't want to risk it, I'm not gonna mess up this time."

"You're my friend and I'm going to help you fix this," he says, Dustin watching in silence. "You shouldn't have to do this by yourself." Dustin ponders the offer, rubs the area by his nose and nods.

"Okay." Will heaves a sigh and returns to his spot on the ground. There's a fifty percent chance that Dustin's saying okay wasn't him

saying I'll talk but him saying alright, you made your point; Will passes up two files. But what other choice did Will have but to take it as the best he'll get and finish the job? Neither of them would be leaving that room if the job wasn't completely finished, every file sorted and placed in their corresponding order because that was Dustin's way and Will wouldn't leave until Dustin was done. So they file and refile, check and recheck until Dustin is satisfied with the work they've done. Dustin accepts Will's high five and they go their separate ways, both receiving 12 dollars for their service.

The ride home with Hopper is thankfully quiet, both guys too tired to say much of anything. The world outside is splattered with purples and blues, the trees nearly black in the darkness of the sun setting. Jane would be catching a ride home with Mark and Jonathan was most likely at home, watching television, per the norm.

Once they're home, Will goes straight to his bed, removing his shoes and hiding in the sheets. The sheets are cold around him, but he settles in fairly quickly, the wings of sleep wrapping around him pulling him into a calm of almost slumber. Earlier that day, he'd moved his supercomm to his nightstand, the device standing tall, antenna to the ceiling. But he changed the channel to C, to have a bit of peace from Mike's constant calling. Moments from REM, Will awakens to the sound of the line crackling.

"Hey, Will..?" It's Dustin. Will startles awake, sitting up clumsily and grabbing the supercomm. He holds it by his ear. "I don't know what channel you use or whatever, but you said I should talk when I feel like talking and, and I really feel like talking."

Silence. Will rubs his eyes to see the buttons on the Walkie Talkie. The device crackles. "It's fucking 12 am, what the hell am I doing?" Dustin mumbles. Will lows the volume down before gripping the button on the side.

"I wasn't sleeping, really," he shrugs. A moment of drawn-out quiet.

"You need to talk too?" Dustin asks at a whisper. Will remembers the dream he woke up to and notes the possibility of him having another one of them as soon as he falls asleep and nods.

"Yeah."